Why Small and Medium Businesses Fail at Programme Delivery the Same Way FTSE100s Do (Just Faster)

Large organisations have luxury smaller businesses don't: room to fail slowly. A FTSE100 company can let a programme run over budget for months before anyone outside the finance team notices. A 20-person business can't. The same governance mistakes hit both, but for the smaller business the runway to recover is shorter, the cash reserves are thinner, and the person accountable is usually also the person trying to run the rest of the company at the same time.

Having spent 20+ years fixing programmes inside organisations like Tesco, Kellogg's, and Morrisons, the pattern is strikingly consistent regardless of company size. It's rarely the technology that fails. It's one of three things.

Mistake one: nobody owns the decisions

In a large organisation, a failing programme eventually gets a steering committee, an escalation path, and someone whose job it is to say yes or no. In a smaller business, decisions often get made in the moment, by whoever is in the room, and get quietly reversed a week later by someone who wasn't. Nobody is being careless. There simply isn't a structure that makes ownership explicit.

The fix isn't bureaucracy. It's one page that says who decides what, and who gets told once a decision is made.

Mistake two: scope creep that never gets logged

Every addition to a project sounds reasonable in isolation. A small change here, a "while we're at it" there. None of them individually look like a threat to the budget or the deadline. Collectively, they're usually the single biggest reason a programme runs over. Larger organisations at least have a change control process, even if it's clunky. Smaller businesses often have none, so scope grows invisibly until the budget or the deadline breaks.

Mistake three: stakeholders who think they agree

Ask three people in a business what "done" looks like for the same project, and you'll often get three different answers. In big companies this gets surfaced, eventually, through governance forums. In smaller businesses, misalignment often doesn't surface until launch week, when it's the most expensive possible time to discover it.

Why this hits smaller businesses harder

None of these three problems are unique to size. What changes is the margin for error. A FTSE100 company can absorb a six-figure overrun and barely feel it. For a small or medium business, the same percentage overrun can threaten the whole project, or the year's budget. There's also usually no PMO, no dedicated governance function, and no spare capacity to build one while also running the business day to day.

What works

The businesses that recover from this, at any size, tend to do three simple things: name one person as the decision owner and write it down, log every scope change against the original plan even if it's just a shared document, and get explicit sign-off from every stakeholder on what "done" looks like before work starts, not after.

None of this requires a full-time hire. It requires discipline, and usually a short amount of time from someone who's seen the pattern before and isn't emotionally invested in how the project got to where it is.

If this sounds familiar

If a project in your business is already showing signs of scope creep, unclear ownership, or stakeholders who aren't aligned, it's usually fixable without a restart. Book a Discovery Call and we'll spend 15 minutes understanding where things stand.

SJH Solutions
Fractional Programme Director Services
Email: info@sjhsolutions.co.uk | Phone: 07857 315259
Website: sjhsolutions.co.uk/resources