The Programme Red Flag Checklist

7 Warning Signs Your Transformation Is Heading for Trouble (And What to Do About Each One)

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Introduction

Most programme failures don't happen suddenly. They accumulate slowly – missed signals, ignored warnings, optimistic reporting – until one day the board asks a question you can't answer.

This checklist covers the seven red flags we see most often when we're called in to rescue troubled programmes. If you're seeing three or more of these, it's time to act before the problem compounds.

Red Flag #1: Nobody Owns It (Really)

The symptom: When you ask "who's accountable for this programme?", you get a committee, a steering group, or someone who's "overseeing it alongside their day job."

Why it matters: Programmes without clear single-point accountability drift. Decisions get deferred. Issues get escalated into the void. Vendors quickly learn there's no one who can actually hold them to account.

What good looks like: One named individual with the authority to make decisions, the time to focus on delivery, and clear accountability for outcomes.

Quick diagnostic: Can you name, in one sentence, who will be held responsible if this programme fails? If the answer involves "shared accountability" or "the steering committee", you have a problem.

Red Flag #2: Your Best People Are Doing the Wrong Work

The symptom: Your senior engineers, architects, or technical leads are spending their time in project meetings, writing status reports, or chasing vendors – instead of doing technical work.

Why it matters: This is a double loss. You're burning out your most valuable people on work that doesn't use their skills, AND you're not getting proper programme management because they're not trained for it.

What good looks like: Technical people do technical work. Programme management is done by people who know how to run programmes.

Quick diagnostic: Ask your most senior technical person how much of their week is spent on actual technical work versus meetings, reports, and coordination. If it's less than 50%, you're misallocating your scarcest resource.

Red Flag #3: The Vendor Says Green, But Nothing Ships

The symptom: Every status report shows green or amber. Every steering committee is told things are "on track with minor risks." But when you look for actual delivered functionality, there's precious little to show.

Why it matters: Vendors are incentivised to report positively. Without independent verification and hard milestone gates, you can be three months from go-live before anyone admits you're actually nine months away.

What good looks like: Milestone-based contracts with clear acceptance criteria. Independent progress verification. Earned value tracking, not just activity reporting.

Quick diagnostic: Ignore the RAG status. List what was supposed to be delivered by now versus what's actually been delivered and accepted. If there's a gap of more than 15%, the programme is not "green" regardless of what the report says.

Red Flag #4: The Plan Is a Work of Fiction

The symptom: There's a project plan somewhere – probably in MS Project or Smartsheet – but it hasn't been updated in weeks, doesn't reflect reality, and nobody uses it to make decisions.

Why it matters: A plan that isn't maintained isn't a plan. It's a historical document. Without a credible, baselined plan, you can't forecast, you can't identify slippage early, and you can't make rational trade-off decisions.

What good looks like: A maintained plan with realistic estimates, clear dependencies, named owners, and regular replanning cycles. Used for decision-making, not just reporting.

Quick diagnostic: Open the plan right now. Does it reflect what's actually happening this week? Could you use it to answer "what happens if X is delayed by two weeks?" If not, you're flying blind.

Red Flag #5: Every Project Is Urgent (So None Are)

The symptom: You've got multiple programmes running, all classified as "critical priority." Resource conflicts are resolved by who shouts loudest. People are spread across four projects, doing none of them well.

Why it matters: When everything is priority one, nothing is. You end up with multiple programmes all going slowly, rather than fewer programmes going well.

What good looks like: Explicit portfolio prioritisation. Clear rules for resource allocation. Willingness to pause or kill lower-priority work to protect what matters.

Quick diagnostic: If you had to stop two of your current programmes tomorrow, could you instantly name which ones? If not, your prioritisation isn't clear enough.

Red Flag #6: The Board Gets Narrative, Not Data

The symptom: Board reporting consists of paragraphs of prose, subjective assessments, and RAG statuses that never change. There's no objective data, no trend lines, no forecast accuracy tracking.

Why it matters: Boards make decisions based on what you tell them. If what you tell them is subjective narrative, they can't challenge it effectively – and neither can you.

What good looks like: Quantitative metrics: milestone completion rate, forecast vs actual, budget burn, risk trajectory. Presented consistently so trends are visible.

Quick diagnostic: Look at your last three board reports. Could a new board member, seeing only the data (not the narrative), correctly identify whether the programme is healthy? If not, the reporting isn't decision-ready.

Red Flag #7: Success Depends on Heroes

The symptom: You know that if one or two key people left, the programme would be in serious trouble. Critical knowledge lives in heads, not documents. Key relationships are personal, not institutional.

Why it matters: Hero-dependent delivery is fragile. People leave, burn out, or get hit by buses. Programmes that can only succeed with specific individuals are carrying single points of failure.

What good looks like: Documented processes. Cross-trained team members. Relationships held at organisational level, not personal level. Succession plans for key roles.

Quick diagnostic: Name your single most critical programme person. If they resigned tomorrow, how long before the programme was back to full effectiveness? If the answer is "months" or "it wouldn't be", you have a key-person dependency that needs addressing.

Scoring Yourself

0-2 red flags: You're in reasonable shape. Focus on the specific gaps you've identified.

3-4 red flags: You have structural issues that are probably causing drag on delivery. Addressing them now will be significantly cheaper than waiting until they compound.

5+ red flags: Your programme has a meaningful probability of failure without intervention. The question isn't whether to act, but how quickly.

What To Do Next

If you're seeing multiple red flags, you have three options:

1. Fix it internally – If you have the bandwidth, skills, and political capital to address these issues with your existing team, do it. Start with accountability (Red Flag #1) – everything else flows from there.

2. Get an independent assessment – Sometimes you're too close to see clearly, or you need external credibility to drive change. A 2-3 week diagnostic by someone who's seen dozens of programmes can identify the real blockers and give you a recovery roadmap.

3. Bring in delivery leadership – If you don't have the senior programme management capability internally, and the stakes are high enough, bringing in experienced delivery leadership may be the fastest path to getting back on track.

About LinLex

LinLex provides senior programme delivery leadership for PE-backed and mid-market organisations. We've delivered £15m+ portfolios, rescued programmes that were stuck for 24+ months, and built PMOs that actually work.

If your programme needs an honest assessment, a turnaround, or ongoing delivery leadership, let's have a conversation.

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