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Information Governance

Enabling good decision making in complex organisations

Organisations fail to manage information well for a variety of reasons – lack of skills, insufficient resources, unclear objectives, inconsistent processes, etc. However, many of these reasons stem from one root cause: different groups within the organisation make conflicting decisions about what to prioritise, which standards to apply, which processes and tools to use, and so on. These conflicting decisions in turn divert our resources from the most important issues, increase costs (e.g. by creating duplication and rework), slow down execution, and reduce the quality of the final outcomes. The politicking that surrounds such decision-making can also add significant costs (financial and human) and delays to the decision making process itself. Resolving these conflicts is the realm of governance.

The Institute on Governance (www.iog.ca) has defined governance as "*the process whereby societies or organizations make important decisions, determine whom they involve and how they render account*". Good governance allows organisations to make effective decisions, to make them in an efficient way, and to monitor and refine the outcomes of these decisions so as to improve overall organisational performance. By separating the decision making process and associated roles and responsibilities from the decision itself, and by agreeing this process up front, clear governance allows people to focus their energy on understanding the issues and identifying good solutions. Without this focus, people often spend a lot of time deciding who needs to be consulted and defining a decision making process, detracting their attention from the decision itself. At worst, decision making then degenerates into politicking and indecision.

This white paper looks at some of the factors you might consider when establishing appropriate governance structures and processes for information management within your organisation.

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This white paper is based on his chapter *Establishing Clear Governance* in *Information Management Best Practices - Volume 1*, published by The Information Management Foundation, TIMAF.

1. Treat information as an asset

A primary objective of governance is to ensure that assets are managed in a way that respects the wishes of their owners and other stakeholders. Thus, for example, corporate governance frameworks focus on ensuring that financial and other assets (real estate, intellectual property, etc) are managed in accordance with the desires of the shareholders. Likewise, effective information governance is an exercise in asset management. Do all you can to understand the value of this asset to your organisation, and to help other people to appreciate this value.

2. Remember that governance is political

Decision rights are about power structures. When we address governance, we set up structures and processes to address concerns such as:

- Who is empowered to make which decisions?
- What process must they use in order to make those decisions? Which factors and criteria should they emphasize?
- Who must be consulted as these decisions are made?
- How will we monitor the effectiveness of the decisions, and hence hold the decision makers to account for the outcomes?

These are all inherently political questions. It is no accident that some of the best examples of clear governance can be drawn from constitutional law – if you want to understand clear separation of powers and decision rights, then it is worth studying documents like the US constitution. To address governance effectively, you need to be prepared to think about how power is built and exercised within your organisation. For example, some people will have power because they manage key resources (finance, real estate, etc); some people will have power through their rank and position; some people will have power because of their expertise. For each decision, you will need to ensure that the appropriate mix of power is brought to bear both to make the decision, and to make it stick.

If we address these political issues effectively in our governance structures (e.g. by ensuring that the right people are seen to be involved in steering committees and other oversight bodies), then they will have less adverse effect on our day-to-day operations. Conversely, organisations where political machinations dominate most actions often suffer from ill-defined or weakly-agreed governance structures.

This white paper aims to enable you to engage in this political arena in a positive way.

3. Don't play political games

It is important to understand and work with the power structures in the organisation, but playing political games (e.g. acting to undermine people or build secret alliances) tends to lead to continued infighting rather than clear governance. Our aim in addressing governance should be to create a clean and open framework for decision making, one where issues, agendas, priorities, standards, policies, roles and responsibilities, etc, are clear and understood by all. If we play games along the way, the legitimacy of the resulting framework will be undermined.

4. Create clear separation between governance and management

Although many application vendors would like you to believe that governance is just a fancy word for management, the two concepts are distinct. Governance identifies who is responsible for making which decisions and what process they should use in order to make legitimate decisions (i.e. decisions which will be accepted by the rest of the organisation and its stakeholders). Management is then about actually making the decisions – monitoring the environment, gathering information, balancing trade-offs, and so on.

When defining a governance framework, focus on identifying who is responsible for key decisions, and on the overall principles applying to those decisions. If a particular process must be followed (e.g. because legislative requirements or corporate policies dictate it) or has been demonstrated to be especially effective, then that should be defined also. Beyond that, let people get on with making their own decisions. If governance encroaches too heavily on defining the details of decision criteria, outcomes, etc, then it risks running into one or more of three roadblocks:

- **Political conflict and resistance**. If governance encroaches too heavily on people's operational flexibility and professional judgement, then they will begin to resist or undermine it.
- **Loss of overview**. The more you focus on the details of individual decisions, the greater the risk you will lose sight of overall priorities and perspectives.
- **Lack of information**. Specific decisions are often best deferred until detailed information about the decision context is available. You may not have this information when defining the overall governance framework, so risk making poor decisions.

Governance sets the overall boundaries and principles within which people operate. If it tries to replace their skills and judgement, then it will probably fail.

Of course, some decisions will fit clearly within your own remit – many aspects of information management policies and standards, for example, will be within your own competence and sphere of influence. You may well begin to think about detailing these items as you define the governance framework. But even there, it's often easier to separate the creation of these assets from the initial definition of the overall framework.

5. Identify and engage with stakeholders at all levels

Many different types of decision are relevant to information management – setting overall strategic priorities, defining information types and structures, defining taxonomies and other metadata schema, defining design guidelines or standards, etc. Governance can provide a coherent framework which ties all these decisions together. For example, by identifying the points where a design authority should review key decisions, good governance can ensure that individual teams don't make decisions which are at odds with overarching principles and policies. In order to define such a framework, you need to identify all the relevant stakeholders, understand their perspectives, and gain their buy in.

It is worth considering the following dimensions when identifying stakeholders:

- **Strategic scope**. Which executive-level people are involved with decisions that affect information management? Which middle managers affect or are affected by information management policies, processes and standards? Where does information most influence the actions of frontline staff?

- **Organisational structure**. How does information management affect key organisational units (e.g. sales, finance, operations, etc)? Which people within these units are particularly affected by information management, or influential over the way it is performed?

- **Information types**. Which people are involved in the lifecycle of different information types?

- **Geographical location**. Do standards and information needs vary across different regions?

- **External stakeholders**. Which external organisations influence the way you manage information? Regulators are particularly important, but there may also be bodies such as trade associations, joint venture partners, etc, which need to be considered when defining policies and standards.

- **Type of decision**. It is often useful to separate decisions about objectives ("what" we want to do) from those about strategy ("how" the objectives will be achieved), as different people may need to be involved in each type of decision. Undertaking independent reviews or audits of information quality, processes, etc, may involve yet other stakeholders.

It may be worthwhile drawing out stakeholder maps and other graphical representations of the various stakeholders: these will help you understand their relationships and spheres of influence.

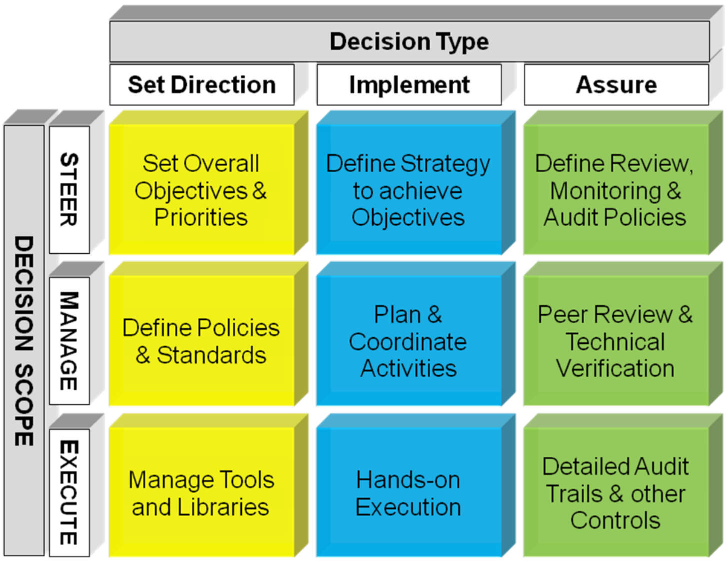
In practice, I've found that the first and last of the above dimensions can give a lot of insight into the roles of different decision makers, and the relationships between them. By identifying the type and scope of decision that different stakeholders are responsible for, we can do much to ensure that accountabilities are clear and complete. The figure overleaf shows a simple 3x3 "governance matrix" which can be used to map out these two dimensions. It divides strategic scope into three buckets:

- **Steering**. At this level, people are concerned with setting overall priorities and balancing trade-offs between different strategic objectives. Decisions are often about marshalling budgets and managing resource conflicts between initiatives.
- **Managing**. Here we are concerned with allocating our assigned resources in order to achieve the prioritised objectives. Decisions are about co-ordinating people, budgets, etc, in order to achieve targets and deal with risks and events.
- **Executing**. This level is about performing the day-to-day activities involved with building systems, delivering information, and so on. People make dozens of decisions as they go about their daily tasks. We need to ensure that these decisions are made in a way that aligns to overall objectives.

The matrix also divides decision-making into three broad types of activity:

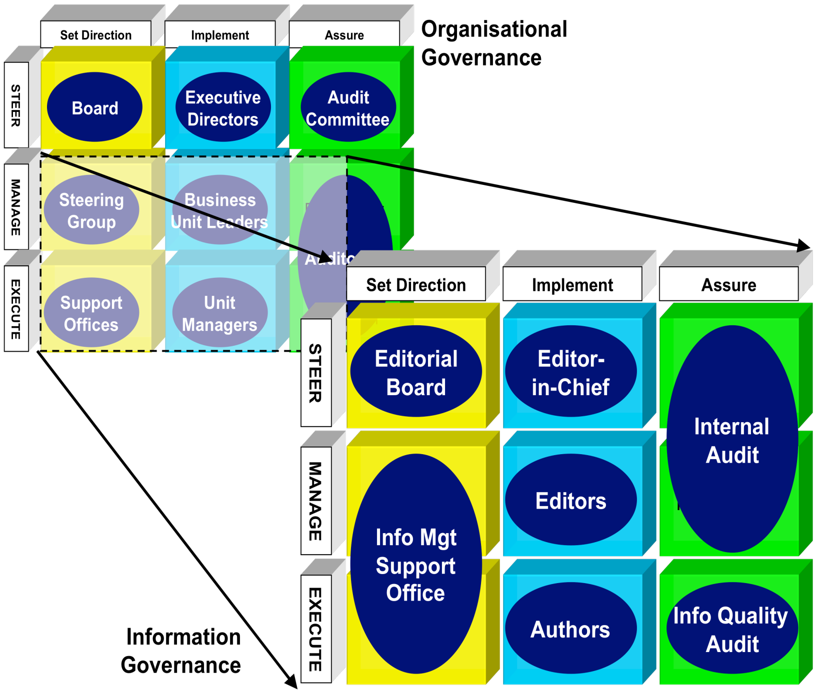
- **Setting direction**. These are the “what” decisions – What are our overall objectives? What standards and policies will have general applicability across multiple initiatives?
- **Implementing**. This is about “how”. How will we go about achieving those objectives within the context of any specific project or process?
- **Assuring**. This is about keeping track of what we’re doing. Are people acting in accordance with the above decisions? Do our original assumptions still hold? Are we feeding accurate information back to the decision makers, so they can learn and fine tune and adjust course as necessary?

Each cell in the matrix illustrates the types of activity that may need to be performed to support a given decision-making activity (setting direction, implementing, assuring) at the different levels of strategic scope. In order to establish an effective governance framework, we need to engage with and understand the people who are undertaking all of these types of activity.



Mapping decision type and scope onto the “governance matrix”

Like any model, this matrix is a simplification. However, it can give considerable insight when thinking about stakeholders and their relationships. Where broader questions arise, it may help to think of the matrix as a fractal, with different versions covering progressively narrower strategic scope, as illustrated in the figure below. In this diagram, it can be seen that information governance provides a more detailed view of one subset of the overall organisational governance structure.



Information governance relates to broader organisational governance

At any point where there are overlapping groups within a cell it may be worth considering the other dimensions to help think through how their roles and responsibilities can be demarcated. The matrix is a tool for identifying what clashes might arise and hence where you need to focus your attention as you delineate decision rights. Good governance is primarily about taking such action, not about writing policies and creating committees.

6. Establish clear roles and responsibilities

Once you understand the stakeholders and their perspectives, you can begin to map out their accountabilities and decision rights. RACI models, as illustrated in the table below, can be invaluable here. These provide a simple, clear way to identify who is

- **Responsible** for a decision or outcome, i.e. they undertake (or manage) the actions necessary to make the decision (gathering and analysing information, convening stakeholder meetings, etc).

- **Accountable** for a decision or outcome, i.e. they approve the final decision and are held to account for its results. Note that they may delegate management of the decision making process to the Responsible party, but they cannot delegate accountability for the decision itself.

- **Consulted** about the decision, i.e. they must be consulted in the course of the decision making process, so that their perspective is considered.

- **Informed** about the decision, i.e. they must be informed of the final decision outcome, so that they can take it into account for their own actions.

The starting point for developing such RACI models will be the process models defining how you manage and use information within your organisation. As you identify key decision points in these processes, you can begin to map out the RACI for each decision.

Body / Decision	Brand Council	Info Mgt Council	Editorial Board	Editor	Author
Define brand guidelines for page design	A/R	C	C	I	I
Define taxonomy and metadata schema		R	A	C	C
Apply keywords to individual articles				A	R
…					

RACI Models can be used to identify responsibility for key decisions, policies and activities

7. Establish appropriate oversight bodies

Many key decisions about information management will fall into the cell in the middle of the left hand column of the governance matrix described above – creation and enforcement of appropriate policies, standards, guidelines, etc. This is the detailed work which many will recognise as the bread-and-butter of information governance. It is likely that you will need to establish appropriate bodies to oversee this work.

Four sets of responsibilities are particularly relevant here:

- Who **defines** policies and standards? This involves work such as identifying relevant standards, balancing trade-offs, framing guidelines, developing templates and checklists, creating examples, and so on.

- Who **approves** these policies and standards? This establishes that the policies and standards are suitable for use across the relevant parts of the organisation.

- Who **enforces** the policies and standards? What mechanisms are to be used for concerns such as auditing compliance with standards, handling exceptional circumstances (e.g. approving variations), or dealing with non-compliance?

- Who **implements** the policies and standards? For example, which groups are responsible for applying standard keywords to documents, or for handling retention and disposal of records.

There is no one-size-fits-all way to allocate these responsibilities. The table below illustrates some of the ways in which they may be handled. The oversight structure appropriate to your organisation will be dependent on factors such as size, organisational culture, regulatory environment, and the diversity of geographical locations and professional disciplines across which you operate.

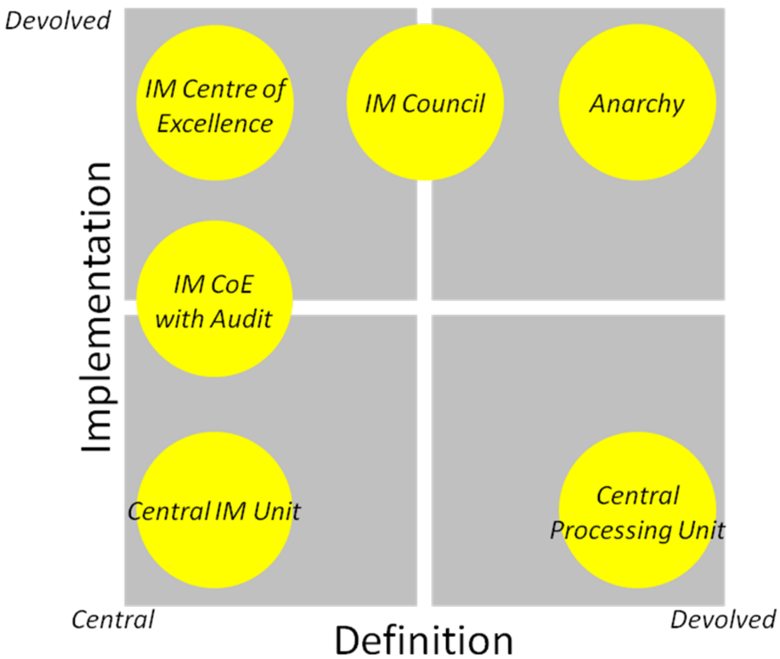
Responsibility	Ways in which it might be allocated
Definition	• **Ad hoc** – individual groups define their own policies and standards • **Council** – members of individual groups come together in order to agree policies and standards which they will all then use • **Central** – a central unit defines the policies and standards which will apply across the organisation
Approval	• **Devolved** – whoever defines the standards is also empowered to approve them • **Executive** – an executive body oversees and approves policies and standards
Enforcement	• **Self** – people or teams are expected to adhere without the need for independent audit or policing • **Peer review** – compliance with standards and policies is checked through a process of peer review • **Audit** – an independent audit function assesses compliance, reporting to an executive function which then handles issues of non-compliance and enforcement • **Police** – an independent audit function assesses and enforces compliance
Implementation	• **Self** – people or teams are expected to perform any work needed to conform to standards and policies (e.g. authors are expected to apply appropriate keywords to documents which they create) • **Central** – a central support function undertakes specialist functions (e.g. a central group of archivists applies keywords in accordance with the corporate taxonomy)

Responsibilities can be allocated in many ways. A key trade-off is often the balance between centralised and devolved decision making.

It can be seen that a key consideration here is the trade-off between central and devolved oversight. As a general rule, central oversight makes it easier to ensure that policies and standards are applied in a consistent way. It may also allow you to optimise the utilisation of specialist skills and resources. On the other hand, devolved oversight can mean that decisions are made closer to the point of creation and use of information, where specific local circumstances are better understood. It can also help to build a greater sense of ownership for policy and standards across the organisation.

The figure below illustrates a simple mapping of the first and last of the above concerns (definition and implementation of policy) onto this dimension of centralised versus devolved oversight. Typical oversight styles or bodies are then overlaid onto this map, as follows. (Note that the names used for these bodies can vary widely across different organisations: the figure just illustrates some common names.)

- **Anarchy**: Individual units or teams define their own policies and standards, and hence perform any activities needed to conform to these policies.
- **Information Management Council**: Representatives of the individual units come together periodically in order to agree policies and standards. The units are then responsible for performing any activities needed to conform to these policies and standards.
- **Information Management Centre of Excellence (CoE)**: A central team (the CoE) defines policies and standards. Individual units are then responsible for performing any activities needed to conform to these policies and standards.
- **Information Management Centre of Excellence with audit**: In addition to defining policies and standards, the CoE may also act to enforce these standards, e.g. by conducting reviews or audits. This brings it closer to implementation as well as definition of policy.



Many organisations separate definition of policy from its implementation. Oversight may then be structured to balance central versus devolved control.

- **Central Information Management Unit**: A central unit is responsible both for defining and implementing policies and standards. Thus it may undertake functions such as maintenance of taxonomies, keywording of documents, records management, etc.

- **Central Information Processing Unit**: Individual units or teams define their own policies and standards, and then contract with a central unit to undertake any activities necessary to implement these policies. (This pattern is also typical of many outsourcing contracts.)

When defining the structure of these oversight bodies, it will also be necessary to define their operating procedures, answering questions such as:

- How frequently will they meet?

- What constitutes a quorum for these meetings?

- How are decisions made? (e.g. by majority vote, by consensus, or by executive decision of the chair?)

8. Focus on what's important.

People make hundreds of decisions every day. Let them. There's a word for governance structures which focus too heavily on the minutiae of day-to-day decisions while losing sight of the bigger picture: bureaucracy. Effective governance pays most attention to the small set of decisions which have a big impact on overall performance.

How do you recognise what's important? Here are some questions to ask:

- **How do information assets relate to wider strategic objectives?** Assets which contribute directly to strategic objectives need to be governed more carefully, e.g. with active ownership throughout their lifecycle and strong enforcement of applicable policies.

- **How do information assets impact on executive and management decision making?** Information which directly supports decision making also needs to be governed carefully, with particular attention to managing concerns such as the accuracy and availability of relevant information.

- **How do information assets relate to external stakeholders and perspectives?** Information which must be provided to regulatory bodies, partners, customers and other external agencies is likely to need different treatment to that which is purely for internal use.

- **What other resources are affected by this information?** Information may contribute to the management of other assets. For example, architectural and engineering diagrams may be necessary for ongoing maintenance of property and plant. Again, such information needs to be governed carefully, e.g. through attention to archiving and retention policies.

- **How do information management processes and policies add value to other processes?** Good governance directs attention towards the assets which are most helpful to other units within the organisation. Thus, for example, the oversight groups discussed above should focus their energy on helping process owners, project teams and suchlike to do their jobs. They generally do this by providing clear guidance on policy and best practice and by helping to resolve difficult issues, not by being "process police".

Focusing on what's important also makes it easier to implement our governance framework: if we expend too much energy and goodwill on minor decisions, then we will have none left when trying to get people to adopt the framework for major decisions.

9. Ensure the details are attended to.

Although it's important that executives, steering bodies and oversight groups don't get caught up in the weeds, it's also true that "the devil is in the details". Good governance will separate overall vision and strategy from the details of policy and execution, and ensure that there is clear ownership of all elements. Typically, oversight bodies will take responsibility for defining the detailed elements of the framework: RACI models, principles and policies, standards, etc. Ensure that ownership of these elements is clear, and that work on them is appropriately prioritised and resourced.

It is worth noting that audit is an important element of governance too: its role is to give internal and external stakeholders confidence that policies and procedures are appropriate and are being followed in practice. So the governance framework needs to define the relationship between oversight groups and auditors, and ensure that the details necessary for successful audit are attended to.

10. Enable action

Oversight bodies and steering groups should not be talking shops – they exist to enable rapid and purposeful decision making. In order to maintain a focus on action, consider

- Devolving decisions to individual teams and units wherever possible. Decision makers who are close to the "front line" tend to have the most current and relevant information. Policies and standards can then be framed to support them, e.g. by defining consistent decision criteria across the organisation.

- Building in central review points and gateways for high impact decisions. These help ensure that local decisions are consistent with overall objectives.

- Creating a clear framework of priorities. Again, this supports local decision makers to act in accordance with overall objectives. (This is also an important success factor for any initiative to set up an information governance framework. You will generally make most progress by focusing on a small number of areas at any one time, only moving to lower priority items once the high priority ones have been addressed. This helps you to visibly deliver value from an early point, thus building morale within the team and credibility across the wider organisation.)

11. Manage relationships

People need to work together to make decisions that contribute to overall objectives. Policies and standards support this, but the key to success is to establish and maintain good working relationships between the stakeholders. As you establish the governance framework, seek to:

- Build common understanding of how roles and responsibilities are allocated. As you develop models such as the RACI tables described above, ensure that people clearly understand the boundaries of their responsibilities, the mechanisms for consultation, handover points, etc. If people have differing views of the boundaries and processes, then they will continue to make inconsistent decisions.

- Clearly separate roles where confusion often arises. For example, project management and process management are different things – a project is a one-off activity while a process is ongoing. Think sprint versus marathon. It is possible for one person to manage the implementation of a new process and then to transition into the process owner role, but only if they consciously change their emphasis as they make the transition. Make the differences clear to people, so they know who is responsible for which decisions.

- Ensure that oversight bodies build respect for themselves. These bodies may be directive, advisory or even policing in their overall approach, depending on the organisation's culture and their position within it (e.g. firms with highly centralised authority will probably position their oversight bodies to create and enforce mandatory policies, while those with highly devolved lines of authority may tend to place these bodies in more of an advisory role). But to be effective with any approach, oversight bodies need to have the respect of managers, editors, authors and other stakeholders. If they build adversarial relationships, then they will probably fail, even with strong executive backing (unless the executive body is truly dictatorial). Conversely, if they earn people's respect and become the place people turn to for advice and assistance, then they can exercise effective influence even without direct authority.

- Use more carrots than sticks. Successful organisations ensure that people are motivated to do the right thing. If they do need to use a stick, they ensure it has executive backing – nothing damages credibility as quickly as people discovering ways to go around an oversight body by talking to "higher authority".

12. Build a framework for clear communication

People need information to make good decisions. They need to understand overall objectives and strategy, and to be aware of the current status and context. They also need to know what people working in related areas are doing. So as you build the governance framework, you will need to ensure that it is supported by appropriate information flows. Pay attention to concerns such as:

- Building a clear communications plan – who needs to be told what, and what channels will be used to communicate it – from the outset. (And remember that communication should be two-way: build channels to gather feedback as well as broadcast policy.)
- Actively communicating roles and responsibilities, objectives, policies and standards, etc, as they are established and refined.
- Setting clear expectations. For example, be realistic about the scope of policies and about how exceptions will be managed.
- Building clear linkages from policies and standards to corporate goals. As well as defining policy, explain the rationale behind it. Most decisions involve some element of judgement, and even politics. By setting out a clear rationale for policies and standards, you ensure that decisions can conform to the intent as well as the letter of policy. Consider using techniques such as Balanced Scorecard strategy maps to clarify the links between goals and standards.
- Managing the mechanics of meetings. It is not enough to bring people together in oversight bodies, councils and forums. When they meet, they must operate effectively. So ensure that basic meeting discipline is followed – clear agendas, materials circulated in advance, defined procedures for making decisions (is it by consensus or by majority vote, for example, or does the chair decide? What constitutes a quorum?), and so on. Think carefully about the frequency of meetings. If a steering group meets too infrequently, for example, decisions will be delayed and initiatives will be held up. On the other hand, meeting too frequently wastes resources and creates the temptation for executives to micromanage. There is no universal "correct" frequency for meetings: every organisation moves at its own pace (and at the pace set by its competitive environment). You need to become attuned to this pace.
- Giving consistent messages across multiple communication channels. Don't lock information up in documents, reports or portals. Use a variety of tools, and pay careful attention to setting up appropriate information radiators (publicly visible, easily understood and regularly updated displays of key messages and performance indicators).

13. Accept and address conflict

Conflict is a natural state within organisations (and especially in complex organisations, joint ventures, alliances, etc). People have differing goals. Resources are constrained. Different perspectives and experiences lead naturally to different opinions. Don't try to ignore or hide this conflict – it will eventually surface. And if you don't manage it, it will probably surface in extremely unhelpful ways.

Your aim should be to clarify how areas of potential conflict will be managed. Think about where conflicts typically arise – for example, contention for key specialists at certain times of the year – and begin to map out how these conflicts will be managed. How will priorities be decided? Who has the authority to decide? Who must they consult and what factors must they consider? What are the bounds to the trade-offs and compromises they can make?

14. Build in feedback and learning

You're not going to get everything right. And even if you do, what's right today will cease to be right as your organisation and its competitive context evolves. It's important to create feedback loops so you can learn from experience and adapt and improve your governance over time. Feedback can come from mechanisms such as:

- Reviews and retrospectives. Build in points where you step back from the day-to-day operation of a project or process and think about how it can be improved.
- Well-defined metrics and performance indicators. Good performance indicators aren't just pulled out of the air: "Wouldn't it be nice if we could measure the percentage of successful searches". They come from a model of cause and effect: "If we improve our document tagging workflow here, then people will pay more attention to entering the right keywords, and hence the percentage of successful keyword-based searches will rise". Now your performance indicator gives you feedback: if it doesn't go in the direction you expected, that's telling you that you need to rethink the original model, or improve the way it's been executed.
- Listening to people. It's amazing how much you can learn…

Try to build in feedback at two levels. First, there's feedback about individual decisions – how does your decision making process feed back information about whether decisions were correct, and about how they could be improved? Second, there's feedback about the decision making process itself – how will you know if it's operating effectively, and about how it might be improved?

And once you have feedback, act on it. If people see that you're not acting, then they'll stop giving you feedback.

Risk 1 - Getting stuck in the weeds

This is the number one risk for governance initiatives – people get bogged down in the details of policies and compliance. Policies and standards are often the most visible part of an organisation's governance, so many people equate them with governance itself. But policies and standards result from and support good governance; they don't define it. They are the tactical elements that emerge once you've defined the overall approach.

Likewise, compliance is the backward-looking part of governance. It helps demonstrate that decisions were taken in accordance with agreed processes and policies. The forward-looking part of governance creates structures that help people make good decisions in the first place. These good decisions are what add real value for the organisation.

If you focus too much on policies and compliance, then you risk missing this bigger picture – the overall framework of stakeholders and well-considered decision rights that is the core of good governance. You will also lose the attention of senior management. Most executives "know" that governance is important, but they get bored by the details. They may even resent having their time "wasted" by concerns such as compliance, when they really want to be focused on things like meeting revenue targets. With these people, you need to discuss the overview – how governance helps meet overall goals – not the details.

Symptoms of this pitfall include:

- Trying to cover every possibility. If you are trying to define a policy to handle every detailed case and exception, then you're in the weeds. It generally makes more sense to address the overall principles and then deal with exceptions as they arise.

- Focus on policing rather than direction setting. Oversight bodies that concentrate on reviewing decisions after they've been made and telling people where they've gone wrong will find it hard to exert any real influence in most organisations.

- Oversight bodies that become decision bottlenecks. This is often a sign that these bodies are trying to make too many decisions: they're caught in the weeds of tactical decision-making rather than focused on the small percentage of strategic decisions.

- Analysis paralysis. If people spend a lot of time arguing about trivia, or thrashing backwards and forwards between two options, then they are probably missing some element of the overview.

- Internal focus. If people focus on internal benchmarks (e.g. doing a little better than last year), then they are at risk of being blindsided by external developments (e.g. missing an important industry trend).

A common thread to all these symptoms is that, by losing the overview, a team or oversight body not only fails to devote sufficient attention to strategic concerns, but they also damage their own credibility and authority. As they get enmeshed in tactical concerns, their authority to set overall direction is undermined.

Risk 2 - Gaps in critical areas

Closely related to the above, it is very easy to focus on some areas of governance and leave gaps in others, especially if you are caught in the weeds. Gaps can arise in areas such as:

- Stakeholders. People miss key stakeholders, for example focusing too much on regulatory compliance and hence overlooking the need to support the information needs of key internal stakeholders.

- Ownership and accountability. It's very easy to overlook key assets or process areas. If any area has unclear ownership (no owner, or multiple people who think they own the same asset), that's a recipe for conflict and wasted resources.

- Policies and standards. People often focus on the standards they know about – the industry standards that everyone's talking about, for example. But just because it's sexy in the industry right now doesn't mean it's the most pressing concern for your organisation.

- Linkage from strategic objectives. It's all too easy to define a whole raft of "best practice" policies and standards, without considering how they link to organisational objectives.

If key stakeholders are not considered up front, then they are likely to block decisions or require late changes to them. Likewise, unclear ownership of resources or decisions is likely to lead either to overlap and conflict, or to having important concerns "fall through the cracks". And if the link from business objectives to operational policies and standards is missing or poorly understood, then people are probably going to make poor decisions when exceptions or complex cases arise.

Risk 3 - Fudging it

People often leave stuff unclear in an attempt to avoid conflict, or to leave scope for freedom of action. This doesn't work. You need to get the overall framework as clear and complete as possible (without getting caught up in the weeds, of course). There will always be plenty of ambiguities and unexpected circumstances – there's no need to create unnecessary ones.

Risk 4 - Failure to build buy-in

Even with strong executive commitment, it is all too easy for powerful stakeholders to block the establishment of clear governance structures. At an operational level, people can always find ways to bypass agreed processes and policies. This may be done because they lack overview of the broader context, or because they feel they have something to gain by doing things their own way. Whatever the case, it is almost always worthwhile investing significant effort in listening to people, trying to understand their perspectives, and helping them to understand your overall objectives. Without their buy-in, you will struggle to establish effective governance.

Risk 5 - Failure to deal constructively with conflict

If decision makers and oversight bodies spend too much time engaged in head-on conflict, then they risk alienating key stakeholders and diverting energy from key decisions. Conversely, over-reliance on conflict avoidance can lead to important decisions being delayed while consensus is sought, and to meaningless compromises when decisive action is required. Effective governance is about neither avoiding nor creating conflict – it is about finding constructive ways to resolve it.

Risk 6 - Death by checklists

Checklists are useful tools, but followed slavishly they lead to creation of documents and other assets simply to check the box. So, for example, this white paper doesn't contain a list of policies which you must define. What you need will depend on your situation – different organisations, information types, business models, regulatory environments, etc, call for focus in different areas. Use your organisation's strategy and operating model to help identify the areas which are important to you. Use the factors discussed in this white paper to help set up an appropriate governance framework around your chosen focus areas.

Conclusion

Well-defined governance allows people to focus their energy on the decision, not on the decision making process. It ensures:

- We know which decisions have the biggest effect on our objectives
- We know who to involve in making decisions – there is no need to rethink this for every decision
- We've agreed who to involve up front – people don't derail the process with boundary disputes and last minute queries
- We've agreed the decision making process up front – there is no politicking and arguing about decision rights
- We've agreed how we'll track outcomes

This all increases the likelihood that we'll make good decisions.

Conversely, poorly-defined governance leads to:

- Wasted resources and inefficient decision making. People invest energy in politicking and boundary disputes. They question the decision making process rather than focusing on the decision. They spend time on peripheral concerns. Decisions take longer than necessary.

- Decisions that don't stick. People undermine or ignore decisions which they consider to be "illegitimate".
- Poor decisions. Key information and stakeholders are ignored, or considered too late. Decisions are driven by power bases, not organisational objectives. People make conflicting or unclear decisions.

Organisations which avoid discussing governance ultimately spend a lot of time on it, addressing it over and over again for each decision as they argue about accountabilities and due process. They end up with little energy left for the decision itself.

At one level, addressing this is simple. Good governance is merely a matter of defining who makes what decisions, how they make those decisions, and how we track the effectiveness of these decisions. At another level, untangling the complex mesh of relationships in most organisations can be incredibly complex. Doing this in the face of an accelerating pace of change can be challenging indeed. Organisations that do it well will have a distinct competitive advantage. Such organisations will use tools such as the ones we've discussed above to:

- Set up a clear framework identifying the roles, responsibilities and relationships of decision makers, and the processes and criteria they will use when making decisions
- Support this framework with a well-defined set of policies, standards and guidelines, with suitable oversight bodies to develop and enforce them
- Communicate this framework widely within the organisation, and actively build people's buy-in to its operation
- Use the framework to address critical questions of prioritisation, resource contention and other conflicts, rather than submerging these issues in politicking, bland consensus building and conflict avoidance
- Build in mechanisms to gather validated information about decision making performance, and hence use that information to trigger learning and improvement

In simple times, we may be able to live with poor governance. As the competitive environment gets more complex or as decisions get more time critical, then we need to ensure that our governance structures and processes are clear.

What Skills do I Need?

The nature of an organisation is tightly linked to its governance. For example, some organisations favour highly centralised decision making whereas others devolve most decisions to local bodies. Some organisations are autocratic whereas others favour a more consensual style. There is no one right way to govern, but rather you should be striving to define a governance framework that is matched to your organisation's culture, its competitive environment, and the nature of its products and markets. In order to do this, you will need skills in the following areas:

- **Strategic Insight**. The governance framework should focus attention on the most important decisions. In order to identify which decisions have most impact, you will need to be able to link information management processes, policies and priorities to your organisation's overall strategic goals.
- **Sensitivity**. People care a lot about decision rights. You will need to be aware of the personal and cultural issues that decision making rights and processes will create, and be able to match the governance framework to norms within the organisation. You will also need to be sensitive to the political climate and power structures within the organisation, as these will determine many aspects of how you implement governance. For example, you may need to use this awareness to choose your battles, knowing when to push for a particular solution and when to back off.
- **Change management**. Establishing governance often involves making changes to other structures and processes. It may even be part of a conscious effort to change elements of the organisational culture. This requires all the skills that go with any substantive change programme – communication, listening, persuasion, enthusiasm, planning, and so on.
- **Domain Expertise**. Many people equate defining governance with setting up information management policies and standards. It can be seen from the above that governance actually needs to address a broader, more strategic, remit if it is to succeed. Nonetheless, many elements of the governance framework may ultimately be implemented through detailed policies and suchlike. Thus you also need to bring substantial domain expertise to bear in order to define these elements effectively.

It can be seen that defining a governance framework is not a junior role. To be successful, you will need substantial experience both of information management and of general and change management.