Governance papers that enable good decision making

A Tregaskis Brown LinkedIn Series

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Are the governance papers you write enabling good decisions?

It is critical that governance papers are constructed in a way that is easy for the audience to navigate and understand. Well-constructed papers enable good decision making, which can have a significant impact on whether a project is delivered successfully or not. However, knowing where to start or how to make papers more accessible can be challenging and time consuming to get right.

In this final article of our four-part series *Nailing the project management must-do's*, we will highlight the importance of good governance papers and provide some useful insights to help authors of governance papers:

1. Understand the audience's needs
2. Make papers easier to navigate and understand

What are governance papers?

In the context of this article, governance papers are predominantly those produced to request a decision (from the Sponsor or governance group) relating to a project and can either result in recommendations to approve, endorse, agree or provide direction on something.

Why are good governance papers so important?

Good governance papers:

- Help shape good quality discussion and problem solving amongst audience members.

- Help the audience clearly understand the range of options available to them.
- Empower the audience to make confident, well informed and timely decisions that enable action and progress (which can have a variety of flow on benefits relating to the performance of the project).

Understanding the audience's needs

Before you start writing a paper, understand your audience's needs and plan out what you're going to cover by using the three critical questions below:

1

What do you need the audience to do?
Papers should provide recommendations which will typically take the form of:

- An approval or endorsement of something
- An agreement to something, or
- A direction on something when direction is sought

2

What does the audience need to know in order to do that?

- The problem, issue, challenge or opportunity facing the project.
- Critical background information and supporting evidence.
- The options that have been considered, what the options will enable and any implications.
- Who has been consulted, what did they say or were there any concerns raised by those consulted?

Why should the governance group care?

Think about the actual or potential impacts on:

3

- The initiative/project.
- The capability being delivered and / or the expected benefits.
- The organisation or service (people, funding and reputation).
- Critical stakeholders (especially external stakeholders).

You can also plan out a paper using the *three whats* concept, (what, so what, now what?) which we discussed in our last article on project reporting. Pay particular attention to the *so what*? (e.g. What are the consequences? Why does this matter?).

Making papers easier to navigate and understand

Good papers are succinct, clear and simple (from the audience's point of view)

When writing governance papers, provide only the core information that is necessary to support a discussion amongst the intended audience, but also giving them assurance that all the thinking has been done. You should aim to keep the paper short, (i.e. main body is 5 pages or less) succinct and avoid using overly technical language (i.e. jargon or acronyms). If you can't tell the story succinctly and simply you can make the audience work too hard to grasp the key issues or ideas, which can impact the timeliness of key decisions.

Supporting detail, if it's necessary, can be included as an appendix or as links to additional documents. These should not be copious and should contain information that a decision maker does not have to read to be able to engage. If you insert graphs or statistics, ensure these are easily understood by non-technical readers – as some may not understand them. There will however be some exceptions to this due to the nature of a document or agenda item – for example, a Business Case which has required input from specialists to arrive at its recommended options may be useful to provide, to give the audience assurance that a robust process was followed.

*F*or papers addressing complex issues it can help to include someone who knows little about the substance in your peer review process. They can help ensure the paper is clear, understandable and has the right level of background / more detailed information.

Tailor for your audience

Your organisation may have standard templates for governance papers, but don't feel completely bound by these. Learn what works for the audience and what they are interested in. Retain the core sections that your organisation requires and discuss opportunities to better target and tailor papers to audience members with the project Sponsor. This will ensure papers are relevant and accessible which will make it easier for the audience to prepare and engage in the governance meeting.

Seeking consultation from governance groups

Governance groups are not a consultation forum and if members need to be consulted, this should occur using an appropriate consultation process outside of a governance meeting.

It can however be appropriate to have discussions with the governance group that seek direction. This may be based solely on a verbal update, or in some cases a formal paper. There are times when the collective wisdom of a governance group can be critical to finding a way through significant challenges.

This approach should be used sparingly though, as seeking direction without having a preferred option or recommended way forward can impact the confidence a governance group has in the project team and can hinder good decision making. Obviously, a project team should raise significant challenges with the governance group, but it is better if some 'get well thinking' has been done beforehand to give the group a head start and provoke their own thinking and discussion.

'Noting' recommendations

'Noting' recommendations should only be included if they are underlining very critical information to support the decision being sought in the paper. For example, a significant business impact of the recommended approval. Lots of 'noting' recommendations can be unhelpful as they tend to repeat key issues or ideas canvassed in the paper and can drown out the actual decision-making recommendations.

Avoid papers with only 'noting' recommendations too. These generally do not serve audiences well, as they eat into people's reading and preparation time without adding much value and are often not allocated any agenda time to discuss in meetings. There are exceptions to this however, including papers that provide information a governance group has requested or a regular project status report or performance update.

Understanding business impacts is critical

If a paper is proposing a change to a project, additional investment or a new way of working, it is very difficult for decision makers to approve or endorse it if the impacts of that decision haven't been sufficiently explained. For example, decision makers will find it difficult:

- Approving an investment without knowing the possible impacts on other pending investments that may be of higher strategic importance.
- Agreeing to a new measure without any viable plan for how it will be implemented.
- Approving a new operational policy, strategy, or service focus without being clear and confident about the impacts on budgets, resources, other services, infrastructure, or enablers.
- Agreeing to a new policy without knowing how 'do-able' it is from an operational perspective or if there are impacts on the wider sector.

Following the *understanding the audience's needs* guidance above, describing business impacts is a key component of a governance paper, as it fosters informed, risk-based decision making and can also make the argument more compelling.

*W*hen drafting a paper, it pays to consult different parts of your organisation that may be affected by the governance decision. For example, if the paper includes recommendations that have financial implications you should consult the organisation's Finance team to best understand how this may impact the wider organisation's financial position or investment pipeline.

If, you or your project team want to update or improve your project management or governance capability, contact Tregaskis Brown. We have a wealth of experience and expertise in both project management and governance and can help you navigate towards success. It all starts with a conversation.

You can also find a range of project management resources on our website here.

About the Author

Andrew joined Tregaskis Brown as a consultant in December 2018, after completing a Bachelor of Commerce, Majoring in Accounting and Finance, and Minoring in Commercial Law.

During his time at Tregaskis Brown, he has been involved in supporting various governance groups for organisations such as Manatū Taonga and Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade. Andrew has also been the writer on a number of Business Cases for organisations such as Waka Kotahi and Wellington Regional Emergency Management Office.