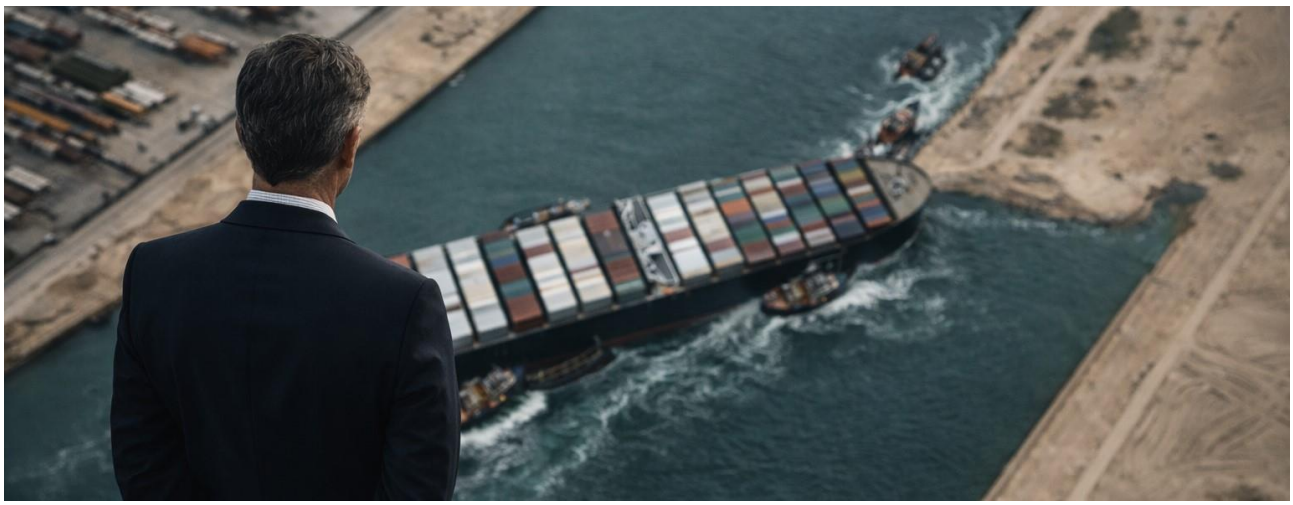
Managing the Unmanageable

How to Hold Tech Partners to Account (Without Sabotaging the Project)

By Mark Conway, Oak Consult, March 2026

Contents



Foreword

Large technology partnerships are rarely entered into lightly.

They are approved with intent, funded with confidence, and governed with the expectation that delivery will improve capability, resilience, or growth. When they succeed, they are barely noticed. When they struggle, the consequences are rarely confined to technology.

What makes these partnerships difficult to lead is not their scale or complexity alone, but the way risk changes shape once delivery begins. Accountability diffuses. Information becomes filtered. Dependency accumulates quietly. Leaders remain responsible for outcomes, yet find it increasingly hard to intervene without disruption. This paper was written for that moment.

Not the moment of public failure — but the earlier, quieter phase when something no longer feels right, yet nothing has "gone wrong" enough to justify decisive action. When reporting is still positive, delivery is still moving, and confidence is already declining.

The analysis that follows is deliberately unsentimental. It moves away from the language of partnership, collaboration, and goodwill, not because those things are unimportant, but because they are insufficient. In high-dependency environments, trust is not the starting point. It is the outcome of disciplined governance, clear authority, and the ability to act when conditions change.

The patterns described in this paper are not theoretical. They recur across sectors, industries, and delivery models. They appear in organisations with capable people and good intentions. They are sustained not by incompetence or malice, but by systems that quietly reward tolerance, delay, and continuity over control.

This is not a paper about better contracts, better suppliers, or better reporting.

It is about **governability** — the capacity of leaders to intervene early, decisively, and without drama when complex partnerships drift. About recognising when confidence has weakened even though delivery continues. About restoring optionality before dependency hardens. And about treating recovery not as failure, but as responsible stewardship.

The organisations that navigate complexity well are not those that avoid difficulty altogether. They are those that recognise the moment before recovery is forced — and choose to act while they still have room to do so. This paper is offered in that spirit.

Mark Conway, Managing Director, Oak Consult

Executive Summary

Large technology partnerships rarely fail suddenly. They become **unmanageable**. Delivery continues, governance forums meet, and reports remain reassuring — yet confidence erodes, dependency deepens, and leaders quietly lose the ability to intervene without disruption.

This paper examines why that happens, and what effective leadership does when it does.

From "Strategic Partner" to Structural Dependency

Many organisations describe major suppliers as *strategic partners*. The intent is positive. The effect is often the opposite. Once the language of partnership replaces enforceable accountability, an **accountability gap** opens. Objectives remain aspirational rather than governable. Information asymmetry grows after contract signature. Risk is assumed to have been transferred, even though operational and reputational consequences remain firmly with the organisation. The result is not bad behaviour — it is predictable behaviour in a system where incentives, information, and authority are misaligned.

Why Governance Weakens Over Time

Most partnerships start with alignment. Few sustain it. As delivery progresses:

- objectives are no longer revisited
- reporting becomes curated rather than decision-grade
- escalation feels political rather than procedural
- and dependency quietly replaces choice

Trust is often cited as the answer. In practice, trust without structure becomes fragile. Where visibility is not independently verifiable, confidence declines long before metrics turn red. Highly capable people compensate. Relationships absorb friction. Progress continues — but control is eroding.

Execution Reveals What Governance Failed to Resolve

Execution is where the reality of a partnership becomes visible. Integration exposes unclear ownership. Penalty regimes lose their effect once dependency is established. Supplier-owned reporting blurs truth. Intervention is delayed because it feels disruptive, even when continuation is riskier. In many organisations, recovery is postponed not because leaders lack awareness, but because **no one feels authorised to act**. This is not a communication failure. It is a governance failure.

Incentives That Quietly Reward Drift

Contracts are designed to manage risk. In practice, they often disguise it. Research consistently shows material value leakage after contract signature. Exit is assumed to be possible but rarely executable. While most senior sponsors expect exit readiness, only a small minority of organisations can demonstrate credible, rehearsed alternatives. Where exit is not credible, delay becomes rational. Incentives reward continuation over completion. Tolerance replaces accountability.

Adaptability as a Test of Control

Conditions change. Markets move. Technology evolves. Partnerships that cannot adapt without destabilisation harden into dependency. Lock-in accumulates through bespoke solutions, concentrated knowledge, and informal workarounds. A critical signal of weak governance is when **people become the control system** — when progress depends disproportionately on specific individuals rather than institutional authority. Their departure does not cause failure; it reveals that control has already migrated away from structure.

Recovery Is a Leadership Act

Recovery is not about salvaging relationships. It is about **reasserting governability**. Effective recovery begins when leaders:

- name the reality early
- reset authority and decision rights
- establish a single, verifiable view of progress
- and restore credible optionality

Relationships matter — but only when they enable intervention rather than delay it. Recovery is not an admission of failure. It is stewardship under changing conditions.

Recognising the Moment Before Recovery Is Forced

Most organisations can recognise the warning signs:

- confidence declining despite positive reports
- recurring issues without resolution
- inability to change course without major disruption
- disproportionate impact when key people move on

The difference between successful and costly outcomes is not whether these signals appear, but **when leadership chooses to act**.

The Leadership Imperative

This paper does not argue for tougher contracts or better suppliers.

It argues for **governability** — the ability of leaders to intervene decisively, early, and without drama when complex partnerships drift.

Technology partnerships do not fail because people stop trying.
They fail when systems reward the wrong behaviour and leaders lose the ability to correct course.

The organisations that succeed are those that recognise drift early — and treat recovery not as failure, but as responsible leadership.

1. The Illusion of the “Strategic Partner”

Most complex technology partnerships do not fail loudly; they drift.

Milestones are technically met. Status reports remain reassuring. Steering meetings continue. And yet—value erodes, delivery confidence weakens, and control slowly slips away.

Some partnerships do fail outright.
Many more do not.

Instead, they **underperform quietly**—delivering less value, less certainty, and less strategic benefit than leaders expected when the partnership was formed.

The common explanation is complexity. Or technology. Or change fatigue.

The reality is simpler, and more uncomfortable:

many so-called “strategic partnerships” reduce leverage instead of strengthening it.

1.1 The Language Trap

The word *partner* is usually introduced with good intent - It signals collaboration, long-term thinking, and shared success.

But in practice, the label often changes behaviour in subtle and unhelpful ways.

Once a supplier is framed as a “strategic partner,” leaders become reluctant to govern them with the same clarity they would apply internally. Accountability softens. Escalation becomes awkward. Decisions that should be explicit are handled informally.

What was meant to signal maturity quietly dilutes control.

This is not a failure of trust.
It is a failure to recognise that **trust without enforceable governance does not survive pressure**.

Strategic intent does not replace decision rights.
Shared ambition does not substitute for clear authority.
And goodwill does not endure unless it is protected by structure.

1.2 The Sales–Delivery Fault Line

Many partnerships begin misaligned before delivery even starts. The deal is shaped by sales narratives, future-state promises, and executive-level optimism. Delivery teams inherit those commitments later, often without the context, constraints, or trade-offs that shaped them.

The result is a quiet but persistent fault line:

- expectations set by those who will not deliver
- delivery owned by those who did not shape the expectations

By the time this disconnect surfaces, contracts are signed, dependencies are embedded, and leaders are already invested in success. Misalignment is no longer a design issue—it becomes a political one. At this stage, organisations often respond by "working the relationship harder." More meetings. More goodwill. More tolerance. None of that resolves a structural misalignment that was never governed in the first place.

1.3 The Accountability Gap

A simple test exposes whether a partnership is genuinely governed:

If you could not credibly pause work, change course, or exit—who actually holds the authority?

In many large technology partnerships, the answer is uncomfortable. Long contracts, sunk costs, reputational risk, and operational dependency combine to create a situation where the buyer is formally in charge but practically constrained. The supplier becomes difficult to challenge, even harder to replace, and increasingly central to "how things get done."

This is not partnership. It is unmanaged dependency. Once dependency sets in, performance issues are rarely confronted directly. They are absorbed, rationalised, or deferred—until the cost of intervention exceeds the cost of acceptance. By the time failure is acknowledged, the question is no longer *"what went wrong?"* It is *"how did this become ungovernable without us noticing?"*

1.4 The Communication Gap

Most partnerships do not drift because people stop communicating. They drift because *what is communicated stops being useful for decision-making*. As partnerships mature, information is increasingly translated as it moves upward:

- delivery detail becomes summary
- risk becomes reassurance
- uncertainty becomes confidence statements

This translation is rarely dishonest. It is usually protective. Teams soften messages to preserve momentum. Leaders avoid surfacing discomfort too early. Suppliers frame progress through the lens of partnership rather than consequence. Over time, signals that should prompt intervention are normalised as "delivery noise." The result is a widening gap between what is known on the ground and what is felt at the top. By the time confidence weakens at senior levels, the underlying causes have often been present for months — but filtered out of formal communication.

This is not a reporting failure. It is a governance design failure.

Where communication is not explicitly linked to decision rights, escalation thresholds, and consequence, it becomes narrative rather than control. Leaders remain accountable for outcomes, but are increasingly deprived of the information needed to intervene early.

Drift accelerates not because people are silent — but because truth arrives too late to matter.

2. Strategic Alignment: Where Partnerships Quietly Fail

Most partnerships do not unravel because objectives were unclear. They unravel because objectives were **never made governable**. Alignment is often present at the outset. It is discussed, documented, and agreed. What fails is not intent—but **enforcement**.

2.1 Alignment Is Not a Workshop Outcome

Vision statements and kick-off sessions create momentum, not control. They rarely answer the questions that matter once delivery pressure appears:

- Who decides when priorities conflict?
- What happens when delivery reality challenges the original ambition?
- Who has the authority to stop work that is no longer value-adding?

When alignment is treated as a shared understanding rather than an enforceable system, it survives only while conditions are favourable. The moment pressure increases—budget, time, complexity—interpretation replaces agreement. At that point, alignment becomes retrospective. Each party believes they are acting in line with the original intent, even as outcomes diverge.

2.2 Expectations Must Be Enforceable

Effective alignment is about **decision rights, escalation paths, and consequence**. That means making the uncomfortable explicit, early:

- Who owns outcomes, not just tasks?
- How are disagreements resolved and what triggers escalation?
- What happens when progress stalls?
- When does exit becomes a legitimate option, not a threat?

Without this clarity, governance meetings become performative. Issues circulate without ownership. Decisions are deferred in the name of harmony. Accountability dissolves into consensus-seeking. Clarity at the start is not adversarial. It is protective—of both the relationship and the outcome.

2.3 Mutual Value Without Mutual Blindness

“Win-win” partnerships fail if only one side feels the pain of delay, scope drift, or rework. Behaviour will eventually follow incentives rather than intent. True mutual value requires proportional exposure. Success is shared, failure is visible and any incentives reward outcomes, not activity.

When this balance is absent, the partnership drifts toward self-preservation on one side and sunk-cost tolerance on the other.

2.4 Cultural Compatibility Is a Multiplier

Delivery culture matters more than most leaders expect. Differences in pace, escalation norms, risk tolerance, and decision-making style rarely surface in procurement. They surface in delivery—when pressure is real and time is short. Misalignment is often compounded when technical operating models clash—for example, agile delivery expectations imposed on organisations governed by waterfall funding, assurance, or change-control disciplines.

When cultures clash, conflict becomes personal rather than productive. Issues are softened to avoid friction. Escalation is delayed to preserve relationships. Problems grow quietly. Cultural mismatch does not usually cause failure on its own. But it accelerates every other weakness in the system.

2.5 Structural Alignment Is a Leadership Design Choice

In large, complex partnerships, alignment rarely fails because roles are missing. It fails because alignment itself has no clear owner.

Most programmes include:

- an executive sponsor
- a programme or project lead
- a business owner
- subject-matter experts for key contractual, technical, and operational domains
- supplier counterparts mirroring many of these roles

On paper, this looks robust.
In practice, it often fragments authority.

Sponsors own ambition but not day-to-day trade-offs.
Programme leads manage delivery but lack mandate to reset scope or challenge assumptions.
Business owners feel the impact of outcomes but are distant from delivery reality.
Subject-matter experts hold critical knowledge but limited decision rights.

Alignment is discussed everywhere — but governed nowhere.

When pressure appears, decisions fall between roles.
Trade-offs are deferred.
Escalation feels political.
No single role is clearly authorised to reconcile ambition, delivery reality, and consequence.

This is not a capability problem.
It is a structural one.

Effective partnerships design explicitly for this moment. They make alignment someone's job — with authority to:

- arbitrate conflicts between objectives
- reset priorities when conditions change
- challenge progress that no longer supports outcomes
- and trigger escalation without personal risk

Where alignment has no structural owner, it survives only while conditions are favourable.
When complexity increases, it dissolves into negotiation, goodwill, and delay.

Alignment that is not anchored in role, authority, and consequence is not alignment at all.
It is shared intent — and shared intent does not govern delivery.

3. Communication and Trust (Without Naivety)

Trust is essential in complex partnerships - Blind trust is not. Most leaders understand this in theory. In practice, trust is often treated as a starting condition rather than something that must be **earned, tested, and reinforced under pressure**. This is where many partnerships begin to drift. Not because people stop talking—but because communication becomes disconnected from consequence.

3.1 Communication Is Not a Soft Skill — It Is Governance

Partnerships rarely fail due to lack of communication. They fail because communication is **misused**. Status updates replace decision-making. Meetings multiply without clarity. Reports describe activity rather than outcomes. The rhythm looks healthy. The substance is thin. Effective communication in a complex partnership is not about openness or frequency. It is about **cadence with purpose**:

- regular operational truth
- timely surfacing of risk
- clear linkage between information and action

Without this, communication becomes performative. Problems are discussed, noted, and deferred. Over time, leaders mistake motion for progress and dialogue for control. Good governance does not reduce conversation. It ensures conversation leads somewhere.

3.2 The Danger of “Polite Reporting”

One of the most common failure patterns in large technology partnerships is **polite reporting**. Everything appears calm. RAG statuses stay reassuring. Risks are acknowledged—but framed as manageable. Delivery confidence is expressed carefully.

Behind the scenes, teams adapt workarounds, tolerate slippage, and quietly reset expectations. This is rarely dishonest. It is usually cultural. People soften language to preserve relationships. Issues are framed cautiously to avoid escalation. Concerns are parked “until we know more.” The result is delayed truth.

By the time problems become undeniable, the organisation has already absorbed cost, delay, and dependency. What looked like a sudden crisis is usually the outcome of months of suppressed signals. Trust does not fail because people lie.
It fails because **truth arrives too late to matter**.

3.3 Transparency Is Not the Same as Visibility

Many partnerships mistake transparency for control. Dashboards are shared, reports are circulated and metrics are discussed. Yet when challenged, leaders struggle to answer basic questions:

- Which outcomes are genuinely at risk right now?
- Where is progress dependent on goodwill rather than evidence?
- What decisions are being postponed because the data is unclear?

This happens when visibility is outsourced. When the primary narrative about progress comes from the partner delivering the work, the organisation gradually loses its independent view of reality. Reporting becomes curated. Metrics are selected. Interpretation replaces verification. This does not require bad intent. It only requires asymmetry. This is why effective governance requires a Single Version of Truth (SVOT): a shared, verifiable view of progress and risk that is owned by the organisation accountable for outcomes, not curated by the party delivering the work.

3.4 Cadence Without Consequence Erodes Trust

Trust is reinforced when people see that issues raised early lead to action. It erodes when the same concerns appear repeatedly with no visible consequence. In many partnerships:

- risks are logged but not resolved
- decisions are deferred to preserve harmony
- escalation is treated as failure rather than responsibility

Over time, teams learn what is *safe* to raise and what is not. Communication narrows. Reality is filtered. Ironically, this often happens in partnerships that describe themselves as "high trust." Trust does not come from reassurance. It comes from **consistent linkage between signal and response**.

3.5 Ownership Changes the Quality of Communication

Where "everyone owns the partnership," no one truly does. Ambiguity about ownership weakens communication in predictable ways:

- issues circulate without resolution
- accountability blurs across teams
- escalation feels personal rather than procedural

Effective partnerships have a single accountable owner, a clear internal sponsor and a defined authority to escalate, intervene, and make decisions. This does not centralise blame. It concentrates responsibility. When ownership is clear, communication improves—not because people speak more freely, but because they know **what will happen when they do**.

3.6 Trust Is an Output, Not an Input

The most resilient partnerships do not rely on goodwill. They **manufacture trust through discipline**.

- issues surface early
- evidence is shared openly
- decisions are taken visibly
- consequences are predictable

Over time, confidence grows—not because the relationship feels good, but because it proves reliable under stress. Trust that depends on optimism is fragile. Trust that is built through governance endures.

4. Execution — Managing What Actually Happens

Execution is where most technology partnerships lose credibility. Not because delivery teams are incompetent, but because **execution exposes what governance failed to resolve earlier**. Ambiguity becomes friction. Optimism meets operational reality. And relationships are tested under real pressure. This is where partnerships stop being aspirational and start becoming operational.

4.1 Starting Small Is Not Caution — It Is Control

Many organisations treat early pilots or phased delivery as a concession to uncertainty. In reality, they are one of the few remaining sources of leverage once a partnership is underway. A well-designed early phase is not a proof of concept. It is a **behaviour test**.

It reveals:

- how issues are raised
- how ownership is taken
- how trade-offs are handled
- whether truth surfaces early or late

Where early delivery is rushed or over-scaled, these signals are missed. By the time patterns are visible, dependency is already established. Starting small does not slow progress. It reduces the cost of learning what is actually being delivered.

4.2 Over-Specification Creates Fragility

When confidence is low, organisations often respond by specifying more.

Detailed requirements. Extensive controls. Comprehensive contractual language.

The intention is safety.
The outcome is usually the opposite.

Excessive upfront specification locks assumptions into place before reality has a chance to challenge them. It encourages bespoke complexity, increases integration risk, and slows decision-making when conditions change.

As delivery progresses, teams spend more time managing the contract than managing the outcome. Change becomes expensive. Adaptation becomes political. Progress becomes procedural.

Over-specification does not prevent failure.
It simply makes failure harder to unwind.

4.3 When Penalties Stop Working

Commercial controls are essential, but they are not magic. In many partnerships, penalty regimes reach a point where they lose their intended effect. Once maximum deductions are applied, they stop incentivising improvement and start hardening positions. At that stage:

- suppliers price risk into behaviour
- clients absorb dissatisfaction without remedy
- negotiation replaces delivery

The existence of penalties gives the impression of control, even as their practical influence diminishes. Effective governance recognises when controls have stopped working and adapts—rather than relying on contractual mechanisms that no longer change behaviour.

4.4 Integration Is Where Reality Shows Up

Complex technology partnerships rarely fail at the edges. They fail at the joins. Multi-supplier environments, layered platforms, and hand-offs between systems expose the true cost of weak governance. Integration issues surface assumptions that were never tested. Accountability fragments across interfaces. When integration responsibility is unclear, disputes multiply:

- was the issue design or delivery?
- whose dependency failed?
- who pays for remediation?

If the client becomes the de facto integrator without the authority, capability, or information to manage that role, execution degrades rapidly. Integration does not just require coordination.
It requires **clear ownership of the whole**, not just the parts.

4.5 When Truth Becomes Contested

A critical moment in any partnership is when disagreement shifts from *what to do next* to *what is actually happening*. At that point, execution is already in trouble. If progress cannot be independently verified, conversations turn adversarial. Evidence is debated. Perception replaces fact. Meetings become exercises in persuasion rather than resolution. This is not a communication problem.
It is a **governance failure**. Execution only works when all parties operate from a shared, verifiable view of reality—controlled by the organisation accountable for outcomes. Without this, delivery becomes a negotiation rather than an execution.

4.6 Execution Without Intervention Is Just Endurance

Many partnerships continue long after it is clear they are under-delivering. Work progresses. Reports are produced. Issues recur. Everyone is busy. What is missing is **intervention**. Execution requires more than monitoring. It requires the ability to:

- pause work that no longer adds value
- reset scope when assumptions break
- intervene when behaviours undermine outcomes

Intervention rarely succeeds without relationships.
Hard resets require trust at senior levels to enable difficult conversations, and psychological safety at delivery levels so issues surface early rather than being concealed, but relationships only help when they are used to *enable* intervention—not to delay it. Without intervention, organisations confuse persistence with progress. They endure delivery rather than directing it. Execution succeeds not when work continues—but when leaders are willing to change how it continues.

5. The Incentive Problem (The Bit Everyone Avoids)

Most technology partnerships fail to correct course not because people lack goodwill, but because **the system quietly rewards the wrong behaviour**. Incentives shape outcomes long after intent fades. When incentives are misaligned, rational people make rational decisions that produce irrational results. This is the part of partnership governance that many leaders sense but hesitate to confront—because it feels commercial, political, or personal. In reality, it is structural.

5.1 The Illusion of Risk Transfer

Contracts are often written as if risk can be cleanly transferred. Service credits, penalties, performance clauses, and liability caps create the impression that delivery failure will be "paid for" by the supplier. In theory, this aligns incentives. In practice, it rarely works that way.

When a partnership under-delivers the supplier may absorb financial penalties, but the organisation still absorbs operational disruption, reputational impact, and strategic delay. Critical services do not stop. Customers are not paused. Leaders remain accountable. Risk is not transferred. It is **disguised**. Once this reality becomes clear, enforcement often softens. Penalties are renegotiated. Performance regimes are amended. Behaviour adjusts accordingly.

5.2 When Failure Is Designed Out of the System

Many partnerships include failure regimes on paper but lack the will—or ability—to use them. Exit is theoretically possible, but practically implausible. Replacement would take too long. Transition risk is too high. Political and reputational costs are too great. Suppliers learn this quickly.

When failure is not a credible outcome, deterrence disappears. Underperformance becomes survivable. Recovery becomes optional. This does not require bad intent. It only requires **asymmetry of consequence**.

Research consistently shows the scale of this gap: while the vast majority of senior sponsors expect their organisations to be exit-ready, only a small minority—around one-fifth—can demonstrate credible, executable exit plans in practice.

5.3 Outcome-Based Incentives Are Harder Than They Look

Outcome-based payment models are often presented as the solution to misaligned incentives. They can work—but only when outcomes are clearly defined, attributable to delivery effort and above all measurable within a meaningful timeframe. In complex technology environments, this is rare.

When outcomes are vague, delayed, or influenced by factors outside the supplier's control, incentives distort behaviour. Effort shifts toward metric optimisation rather than value creation. Reporting becomes defensive. Disputes increase. Outcome-based incentives do not remove the need for governance. They **intensify it**.

5.4 Incentives Live in Relationships as Well as Contracts

Not all incentives are commercial. Personal capital, reputation, career risk, and political alignment all influence behaviour—often more powerfully than contractual terms. Senior sponsors may hesitate to escalate because relationships matter. Delivery teams may soften language to preserve goodwill. Executives may tolerate drift to avoid public admission of trouble.

These behaviours are human—and understandable. But when personal incentives conflict with organisational outcomes, governance weakens. Relationships are spent to preserve stability rather than restore control. Healthy partnerships recognise this tension and design governance to surface it, not hide it.

5.5 When Delay Becomes Rational

In high-dependency environments, delay can become commercially rational.

If a supplier benefits from extended delivery, additional scope, or prolonged dependency, incentives quietly favour continuation over completion. Progress becomes incremental. Resolution is deferred.

From the outside, this looks like incompetence or complacency.
From the inside, it is often rational behaviour responding to the system as designed.

This is why partnership governance cannot rely on trust alone.
It must **actively counterbalance incentives that reward drift**.

5.6 Designing Incentives That Support Control

Effective incentive design does not attempt to eliminate risk.
It aligns behaviour with outcomes that matter.

That requires:

- incentives that reward completion, not activity
- penalties that change behaviour, not just cost
- visibility that prevents narrative smoothing
- and governance that intervenes when incentives stop working

Most importantly, it requires leaders to confront the uncomfortable truth:

If the system rewards delay, tolerance, or ambiguity, those behaviours will persist—no matter how capable the people involved.

Incentives do not need to be perfect.
They need to be **honest**.

6. Adaptability — Keeping Control as Conditions Change

Most technology partnerships do not fail because the original plan was wrong. They fail because **the plan was treated as fixed while reality kept moving**. Markets shift. Technology evolves. Priorities change. What was once sensible becomes constraining. And partnerships that cannot adapt gradually harden into dependency. Adaptability is not about agility theatre, but it is about **preserving control as conditions change**.

6.1 The Hidden Cost of Lock-In

Dependency rarely arrives overnight. It accumulates through bespoke configurations, undocumented workarounds, skills concentrated on one side and operational knowledge embedded in supplier teams. Each decision may be rational in isolation. Together, they narrow options. Over time, leaders stop asking *"Is this still the right partner?"* and start asking *"How risky would it be to change?"*. At that point, choice has already been lost. Lock-in is not a technical failure. It is a governance failure that unfolds slowly and quietly.

6.2 Exit Planning Is a Control Mechanism, Not a Threat

Exit planning is often framed as pessimistic or adversarial. In reality, it is one of the most effective ways to maintain a healthy partnership. A credible exit plan preserves leverage, disciplines behaviour on both sides and importantly clarifies where knowledge, capability, and data truly sit.

Importantly, it is rarely used. Its value lies in *existence*, not execution. When exit is impossible, every other control weakens. When exit is credible, cooperation improves. Exit planning is not about leaving. It is about **remaining in control while staying**.

6.3 Adaptation Requires Honest Re-Evaluation

As conditions change, many partnerships continue on autopilot. Assumptions are carried forward. Scope expands incrementally. Complexity grows. Reviews focus on delivery health rather than strategic fit. Adaptation requires leaders to revisit uncomfortable questions:

- Is this partnership still delivering the value we expected?
- Has dependency increased beyond what we intended?
- Are we optimising for continuity rather than outcomes?

Without deliberate re-evaluation, partnerships drift from strategic asset to operational constraint.

Adaptability is not continuous change. It is **periodic, disciplined reassessment**.

6.4 Scaling Exposes Fragility

Programme growth can magnifies weakness. As programmes scale, integration points multiply, governance becomes slower with multiple stakeholders and escalation paths grow. What worked at pilot or early delivery can collapse under volume. Partnerships that scale successfully do so because:

- ownership remains clear
- authority is reinforced, not diluted
- governance evolves with complexity

Those that do not scale governance alongside delivery often mistake early success for structural resilience.

6.5 Learning Is a Governance Discipline

Many organisations claim to learn lessons, but few systematically apply them. Post-implementation reviews are completed, noted, and archived. The same issues reappear in the next programme, with different names and familiar outcomes. Adaptability requires:

- honest acknowledgement of underperformance
- willingness to name value erosion
- and mechanisms to carry lessons forward across portfolios

Learning that does not change behaviour is theatre. Learning that informs governance is leverage.

6.6 Trust Without Control Is Fragile

As partnerships mature, leaders often lean more heavily on trust. That is natural—and risky. Trust that is not reinforced by control becomes brittle. It relies on continuity of people, stability of context, and goodwill that may not survive change.

When leadership changes, markets shift, or pressure increases, trust alone cannot hold the partnership together. Durable partnerships treat trust as an **output of discipline**, not a substitute for it. Adaptability is not about being flexible. It is about **remaining governable when flexibility is required**.

6.7 When People Become the Control System

In poorly governed partnerships, control does not disappear. It **migrates**.

Over time, authority shifts away from documented decision rights and formal processes and settles—quietly—into individuals. Relationships replace structure. Experience substitutes for clarity. Personal credibility becomes the lubricant that keeps work moving.

This is rarely intentional.
It emerges as a coping mechanism.

Certain roles become load-bearing:

- the sponsor who knows which battles to avoid
- the architect who understands how the integrations *really* work
- the delivery lead who holds the informal agreements together
- the subject-matter expert who knows where the workarounds live

Progress depends less on the system and more on who is present.

For a while, this feels efficient. Decisions move. Issues are resolved informally. Friction is absorbed by trusted individuals rather than escalated through governance.

But it is also fragile.

When those people move on—through promotion, rotation, burnout, or exit—the partnership destabilises suddenly:

- delivery confidence drops
- decision cycles lengthen
- disputes increase
- unresolved issues resurface

What looks like a resourcing problem is, in reality, a **structural exposure**.

The departure did not cause the failure. It revealed that governance had already failed.

Healthy partnerships assume people will change. They design for continuity, not heroics. Knowledge is shared. Authority is codified. Escalation paths are institutional, not personal.

Where the loss of one or two individuals causes disproportionate disruption, the partnership was being held together by people—not governance.

Adaptability is proven not when the right people stay, but when change in people does not threaten control.

7. The Recovery Playbook

Recovery is not about salvaging a relationship. It is about **reasserting control**.

By the time recovery is required, most partnerships have already crossed a quiet threshold. Delivery confidence has weakened. Dependency has increased. Governance has softened. People sense that something is wrong, but struggle to name it clearly.

At this point, optimism is no longer a strategy.

7.1 Recognising When Drift Has Become Danger

The most difficult moment in any partnership is recognising that normal friction has become structural risk. Warning signs are rarely dramatic:

- the same issues recur without resolution
- reporting remains positive while confidence drops
- decisions are deferred “until the next phase”
- escalation feels politically difficult rather than procedurally normal

Recovery does not begin when failure is announced.
It begins when leaders accept that **drift is no longer self-correcting**.

Delay at this point is not neutrality.
It is a choice to let dependency deepen.

7.2 Recovery Is a Leadership Act

Recovery cannot be delegated. It requires senior leaders to step back into the system—not to micromanage delivery, but to reset the conditions under which delivery operates.

This often feels uncomfortable, because it involves:

- challenging assumptions that were previously endorsed
- questioning progress that was recently reported as healthy
- acknowledging that control has weakened

These are not signs of failure, but signs of responsibility. Recovery is not about blame.
It is about **restoring governability**.

7.3 Diagnosis Before Motion

The instinctive response to trouble is action. New plans. New structures. New people.

This is usually a mistake. Effective recovery starts with **diagnosis**, not activity:

- What is actually true about delivery today?
- Where is dependency highest?
- Which decisions are being avoided—and why?
- What work would we stop immediately if we had full clarity?

Without this pause, recovery efforts simply add momentum to an already misdirected system. Truth before motion is not caution - It is discipline.

7.4 Resetting Authority and Decision Rights

No recovery succeeds without clarity on who decides what. As partnerships drift, authority often fragments:

- sponsors hesitate to intervene
- delivery leads absorb risk informally
- escalation paths become unclear

Recovery requires a visible reset:

- who owns outcomes
- who has authority to pause or redirect work
- what triggers escalation
- what happens when agreed thresholds are crossed

This reset is not about control for its own sake. It is about **making intervention possible again**.

7.5 Re-establishing a Single Version of Reality

Many recoveries fail because leaders cannot agree on what is happening. Different reports. Different interpretations. Competing narratives. Recovery requires a **shared, verifiable view of reality**:

- controlled by the organisation accountable for outcomes
- grounded in evidence, not reassurance
- focused on what matters now, not what was promised

Until reality is aligned, no plan—however well intentioned—will stick.

7.6 Plan B as Leverage, Not Threat

One of the most powerful recovery tools is the one leaders are least comfortable using: **credible optionality**.

A realistic Plan B does not need to be executed to be effective. Its value lies in restoring balance:

- it disciplines behaviour
- clarifies dependencies
- and changes the tone of decision-making

Without credible alternatives, recovery discussions become appeals.
With them, they become negotiations.

Plan B is not about leaving.
It is about **making staying a choice again**.

7.7 Relationships Matter — But Only in Service of Reset

Recovery rarely succeeds without relationships.

Senior trust enables hard conversations.
Operational trust allows bad news to surface without fear.
Personal credibility can buy time when decisions are difficult.

But relationships only help when they are used to **enable reset**, not to delay it.

When relationships are used to smooth over problems, recovery stalls.
When they are used to support decisive action, recovery accelerates.

Relationships do not replace governance.
They make governance usable under pressure.

7.8 Recovery Is a Transition, Not an Event

The goal of recovery is not stability.
It is **transition**.

From:

- ambiguity to clarity
- dependency to control
- tolerance to accountability

Recovery ends when the partnership becomes governable again—when leaders can intervene confidently, decisions are respected, and outcomes are directed rather than hoped for.

At that point, delivery can resume with purpose.

Recognising risk. Regaining control.

8. Recognising the Moment Before Recovery Is Forced

Most technology partnerships are not recovered too late because leaders were unaware of the risks. They are recovered too late because the *signals* were normalised. By the time recovery becomes unavoidable, the organisation has usually lived with warning signs for months — sometimes years — without naming them clearly. This section is not a catalogue of failure. It is a **recognition tool**.

The patterns below describe the moment *before* recovery is forced — the point at which leadership still has a choice. Each pattern signals a loss of governability. None of them resolve themselves.

8.1 "We're Aligned — But Progress Feels Slower Than It Should"

What it looks like:

- shared objectives are frequently restated
- delivery continues, but momentum fades
- priorities subtly diverge without explicit disagreement

What it signals:
Alignment exists at the level of intent, but not at the level of decision rights. When trade-offs appear, no one is clearly authorised to resolve them.

What leadership action this signals:
Stop restating ambition. Clarify who decides when objectives conflict and make that authority visible.

8.2 "The Meetings Are Good, But Nothing Really Changes"

What it looks like:

- governance forums run smoothly
- issues are discussed repeatedly
- actions are agreed but rarely decisive

What it signals:
Governance has become performative. Communication is active, but consequence is missing.

What leadership action this signals:
Audit the link between discussion and decision. Identify where escalation is being avoided and why.

8.3 “Everything Is Green — But Confidence Is Dropping”

What it looks like:

- status reports remain positive
- risks are logged but rarely bite
- leaders feel uneasy without being able to point to evidence

What it signals:
Truth is being delayed. Reporting has become curated rather than diagnostic.

What leadership action this signals:
Demand independent verification of progress. Replace reassurance with evidence that supports decisions.

8.4 “We Can’t Change Course Without Major Disruption”

What it looks like:

- exit is technically possible but practically implausible
- alternatives feel too risky to consider
- continuation becomes the default

What it signals:
Dependency has hardened. Optionality has been lost.

What leadership action this signals:
Re-establish credible alternatives, even if they are never used. Control improves as soon as choice returns.

8.5 “Key People Leaving Causes Disproportionate Disruption”

What it looks like:

- progress slows when specific individuals move on
- decisions stall without familiar intermediaries
- knowledge gaps appear suddenly

What it signals:
Control has migrated to people rather than governance. Relationships compensate for weak structure.

What leadership action this signals:
Institutionalise authority, knowledge, and escalation paths. Design for continuity, not heroics.

8.6 “We’re Managing the Contract, Not the Outcome”

What it looks like:

- energy is spent interpreting clauses
- change becomes a negotiation
- delivery discussions feel adversarial

What it signals:
The contract has become a proxy for governance rather than a support for it.

What leadership action this signals:
Refocus governance on outcomes and behaviour. Use the contract to support intervention, not replace it.

8.7 “Everyone Is Working Hard — But Value Keeps Eroding”

What it looks like:

- teams are busy and committed
- progress is incremental
- benefits are quietly revised downward

What it signals:
Incentives reward activity, not completion. Drift has become commercially tolerable.

What leadership action this signals:
Rebalance incentives so that completion, quality, and outcomes matter more than throughput.

8.8 “We Know Something’s Wrong — But No One Wants to Say It”

What it looks like:

- difficult conversations are deferred
- escalation feels political
- leaders wait for clearer evidence

What it signals:
Governance authority has softened. Intervention is possible but uncomfortable.

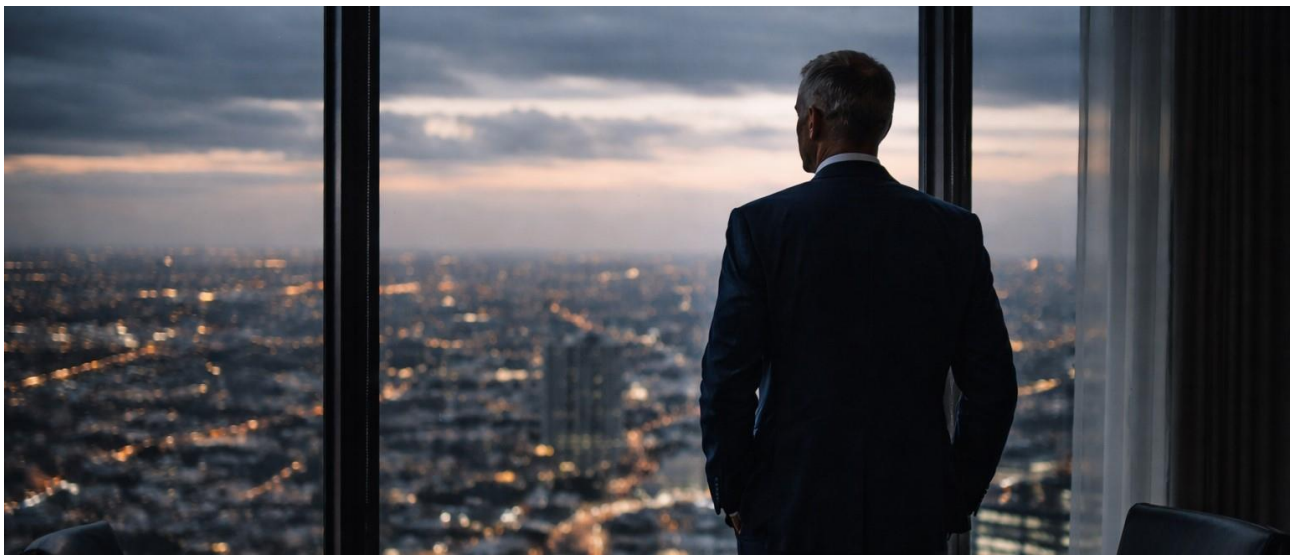
What leadership action this signals:
Name the discomfort. Reset decision rights and create permission to intervene without blame.

Closing the Loop

None of these patterns appear overnight.
They accumulate gradually, often in partnerships staffed by capable, committed people.

The critical difference is not whether these signals appear, but **when they are recognised — and what leaders do next**.

Recovery is not inevitable.
But it becomes unavoidable when recognition is delayed.



9. What Comes Next

This paper is not an argument for tougher contracts, better suppliers, or more oversight. It is an argument for **governability**. Large technology partnerships fail quietly when leadership confuses:

- goodwill with control
- reporting with reality
- continuity with progress

They recover when leaders are willing to do three things deliberately.

9.1 Name the Reality Early

Drift thrives in ambiguity. The moment leaders recognise that confidence has weakened — even while delivery continues — intervention becomes possible. Delay does not preserve stability. It simply increases the cost of recovery. Leadership begins with naming what is already visible but not yet acknowledged.

9.2 Reassert Control Without Drama

Recovery does not require confrontation for its own sake. It requires:

- clarity of authority
- visible decision rights
- enforceable escalation
- and credible optionality

Control does not undermine partnership. It is what allows partnership to survive pressure.

9.3 Treat Recovery as Stewardship, Not Failure

Recovery is not an admission that people got it wrong. It is recognition that conditions have changed — and that leadership responsibility is to adapt governance accordingly.

The strongest organisations are not those that avoid recovery.
They are those that **recover deliberately, early, and without blame**.

Appendix A: Evidence Base and Source References

This appendix sets out the **evidence base** underpinning the claims and observations made in *Managing the Unmanageable*. Its purpose is not to exhaustively reference every statement, but to:

- demonstrate that the paper is grounded in credible research and audit evidence
- distinguish clearly between **empirical findings**, **case evidence**, and **synthesised leadership judgement**
- enable scrutiny without disrupting the narrative flow of the main document

Where insights are explicitly framed as synthesis or leadership judgement, this is stated openly.

Section 1 — The Illusion of the "Strategic Partner"

Section	Claim / Insight Supported	Evidence Type	Source	Notes
1.1	"Strategic partner" language often reduces accountability	Industry research	McKinsey & Company – Strategic Alliances research	Alliance failure and underperformance rates commonly cited at 40–60%
1.2	Information asymmetry emerges once contracts are signed	Academic theory	Principal–Agent Theory (Jensen & Meckling)	Referenced conceptually, not named in body text
1.3	Over-reliance on partner goodwill masks structural risk	Audit evidence	UK National Audit Office (NAO) – Major Projects Portfolio	Repeated findings across large IT-enabled programmes
1.4	Partnerships drift rather than fail abruptly	Synthesised insight	Cross-source synthesis	Based on audit patterns and industry post-mortems

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Section 2 — Strategic Alignment: Where Partnerships Quietly Fail

Section	Claim / Insight Supported	Evidence Type	Source	Notes
2.1	Alignment degrades after contract signature	Industry benchmark	Bain & Company – Alignment and execution studies	Only ~33% of organisations maintain formal partnership strategies
2.3	Mutual value is rarely revisited once delivery begins	Case evidence	IPA / NAO programme reviews	Value assumptions rarely refreshed mid-programme
2.4	Cultural and operating-model misalignment undermines delivery	Industry research	Gartner – IT delivery and operating model alignment	Agile vs waterfall mismatches cited as recurring friction
2.5	Strategic objectives are often unenforceable in practice	Audit evidence	NAO – Contract and supplier management reports	Objectives stated but not governed

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Section 3 — Communication and Trust (Without Naivety)

Section	Claim / Insight Supported	Evidence Type	Source	Notes
3.2	"Polite" or "watermelon" reporting delays escalation	Audit evidence	UK NAO – Major Projects and Digital Transformation reports	Green status masking underlying delivery risk
3.3	Supplier-owned reporting erodes independent visibility	Industry research	Gartner – Single Version of Truth (SVOT) in IT governance	SVOT positioned as antidote to narrative management
3.4	Transparency does not equal decision-grade visibility	Synthesised insight	Cross-source synthesis	Derived from audit + practitioner evidence
3.6	Trust is an outcome of disciplined execution	Leadership synthesis	Multiple sources	Framed explicitly as judgement, not empirical claim

Section 4 — Execution: Managing What Actually Happens

Section	Claim / Insight Supported	Evidence Type	Source	Notes
4.1	Early delivery phases reveal behavioural patterns	Case evidence	IPA – Programme assurance reviews	Early signals often ignored
4.3	Penalty regimes lose effect once dependency is established	Audit evidence	NAO – Supplier management reports	Penalties absorbed without behaviour change
4.4	Integration failures expose governance gaps	Industry research	Gartner / Standish Group	Integration cited as primary failure vector
4.6	Intervention is delayed due to political and relational factors	Synthesised insight	Audit + leadership synthesis	Recurrent pattern across sectors

Section 5 — The Incentive Problem

Section	Claim / Insight Supported	Evidence Type	Source	Notes
5.1	Risk transfer is largely illusory	Industry research	McKinsey – Value leakage in large programmes	Average ~9% post-contract value erosion
5.2	Exit is rarely a credible option in practice	Industry survey	Gartner / procurement surveys	Exit assumed, not operationalised
5.2	Large gap between expected and actual exit readiness	Industry research	Gartner / IPA supplier exit studies	~97% expect readiness; ~20% demonstrably prepared
5.5	Incentives often reward delay over completion	Academic & industry	Incentive misalignment literature	Moral hazard and asymmetric consequence

Section 6 — Adaptability: Keeping Control as Conditions Change

Section	Claim / Insight Supported	Evidence Type	Source	Notes
6.1	Lock-in develops incrementally, not by design	Industry research	OECD / Gartner – Vendor dependency	Customisation and knowledge concentration drivers
6.2	Exit planning improves behaviour even when unused	Case evidence	NAO / IPA	Credible alternatives strengthen leverage
6.5	Organisational learning rarely changes future behaviour	Audit evidence	NAO – Lessons Learned reviews	Repeat failure patterns documented
6.7	Loss of key individuals exposes weak governance	Synthesised insight	Audit + practitioner synthesis	Control migrates into people, not systems

Section 7 — The Recovery Playbook

Section	Claim / Insight Supported	Evidence Type	Source	Notes
7.1	Recovery is typically delayed until risk is unavoidable	Case evidence	NAO / IPA	Early warning signals ignored
7.3	Diagnosis before action improves recovery outcomes	Industry research	McKinsey – Turnaround and recovery studies	"Pause to diagnose" principle
7.6	Credible Plan B changes negotiation dynamics	Case evidence	Public and private sector resets	Optionality restores balance
7.7	Relationships enable reset but do not replace governance	Synthesised insight	Leadership synthesis	Explicitly framed as judgement

Section 8 — Recognising the Moment Before Recovery Is Forced

Section	Claim / Insight Supported	Evidence Type	Source	Notes
8.1–8.8	Recurrent failure patterns are recognisable early	Audit synthesis	NAO / PAC	Patterns repeat across programmes
8.3	Confidence erodes before metrics deteriorate	Industry research	PMI / Gartner	Lagging indicators problem
8.5	People departures reveal latent structural weakness	Case synthesis	Public & private sector	Not causal, but diagnostic

Section 9 — What Comes Next

Section	Claim / Insight Supported	Evidence Type	Source	Notes
9.1	Early naming of reality reduces recovery cost	Industry research	McKinsey – Transformation recovery	Delay correlates with cost overrun
9.2	Control enables partnership under pressure	Leadership synthesis	Cross-source judgement	Normative leadership position
9.3	Recovery is stewardship, not failure	Synthesised insight	Governance literature	Framing choice, not empirical

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Evidence Integrity Note

This paper deliberately distinguishes between:

- **Evidence-backed observations**, grounded in audit, industry research, and documented case experience
- **Synthesised leadership judgement**, explicitly framed as such and derived from consistent cross-source patterns

This distinction is intentional and reflects the reality that not all governance failures are reducible to single studies or datasets.