Programme recovery: the checklist

Programme recovery is decided in the first six weeks

What are the signs a programme needs recovery?

A programme needs recovery when the gap between its reporting and its reality can no longer be closed by the team inside it. The signs are consistent across sectors, and two or three together are enough to act on.

- **The finish date holds while everything before it moves.** Interim milestones slip and the end date stays, compressing untested work into a window nobody believes in.
- **Contingency is drawn faster than milestones are met.** The money describes the programme more accurately than the status report does.
- **The plan has been reset before, without a diagnosis.** The new dates were chosen rather than derived, and they are already slipping.
- **Decisions return to the steering committee unresolved.** The people holding them lack the authority or the information to close them.
- **The supplier owns the narrative.** The best account of progress comes from the vendor, and the client team has no way to test it.
- **Experienced people are leaving.** Knowledge of the systems and the history walks out with them, and the remaining team carries more risk each month.

What happens in the first six weeks of a recovery?

The first six weeks establish the true position, stabilise the programme and produce a recovery plan the board can decide on. Most of the value lies in the sequence: diagnose before promising anything, and stabilise before re-planning.

1. **Weeks one and two: establish the true position.** Read the documents and the delivery data, interview the people doing the work in confidence, and test the forecast against the evidence. The output is a candid statement of where the programme actually stands.
2. **Weeks two and three: stabilise.** Pause the work that is creating risk faster than value, freeze uncontrolled change, and protect the critical path and the people who carry it.
3. **Weeks three and four: reset governance.** Confirm who decides what, rebuild the steering committee around decisions rather than updates, and agree the reporting the sponsor will rely on from here.
4. **Weeks four to six: build the recovery plan.** Derive scope, schedule, cost and risk from the diagnosis, test them with the people who must deliver them, and take the options to the board.

How do you re-baseline a programme credibly?

Derive the new baseline from the diagnosis, have it owned by the people who will deliver it, and size contingency to the risks the diagnosis found. A baseline announced before it is derived will fail the way the last one did.

- Plan from the productivity the programme has actually achieved, measured over recent months.
- Re-scope before re-scheduling: decide what the programme must deliver, and what can move to a later release.
- Price the risks the diagnosis named, and hold contingency where each risk sits.
- Agree in advance how progress will be measured, so the next amber is visible within weeks.
- Take the baseline to the board as a decision, with the options and the cost of each.

Precision Consulting Corporation Pty Ltd, ACN 131 039 506. Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.