



OBEYA
association

WHEN METRICS STOP GUIDING DECISIONS

MATURE PORTFOLIO
OBEYA AND THE HIDDEN
COST OF METRICS



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METRICS TELL YOU HOW THE WORK IS GOING. NOBODY ASKS WHETHER IT SHOULD STILL EXIST

Only when you include stopping less valuable initiatives in the design of your Obeya can you maximise the value of your portfolio.

Many mature portfolio Obeya's are not delivering what they can. That is not because of weak leadership or slow teams.

It is because of what nobody is asking. Initiatives keep running long after the strategic case is no longer valid.

Capacity is consumed by work that would never be approved if it would need to start today.

And the governance system treats all of that as normal, because it was never designed to do otherwise.

I call these **Cold Cases**. And the uncomfortable truth is that your portfolio almost certainly has them, not because you missed something, but because your governance was never designed to find them.

This paper puts forward that the existence question "Does this still deserve to exist?" needs its own moment in the portfolio Obeya.

Not by asking people to be braver, but by changing the design.



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Gerard Berends has spent twenty years working at the intersection of business, IT and change.

What he keeps seeing is that organisations are rarely stuck because people are unwilling. They are stuck because too much is running at once, and the system is not designed to help anyone choose. Everything stays on the list. Work that no longer matters keeps consuming the capacity strategic work needs.

That is what brought him to Cold Cases, and to the question at the centre of this paper: does this still deserve to exist? He helps leadership teams build the governance conditions in which that question can actually be asked, and acted on.

TWO PORTFOLIO OBEYA'S



Both anonymised cases describe organisations with mature portfolio Obeya's that have been running for over two years: active governance, visible metrics, executive involvement.

Case 1, a financial services organisation, grew from 12 to 31 concurrent initiatives in 2 years, while capacity declined due to cost-reduction measures.

Case 2, a public sector IT organisation, grew from 40 to 45 initiatives in two years.

What both portfolios share is not just the growth, but what followed: rising lead times, mounting dependencies, and almost no deliberate stops. The few that happened, were caused by external events, not governance.

Case 1



avg. lead time 23 → 34 weeks



Dependencies increased sixfold

Case 2



avg. lead time 29 → 35 weeks



Utilisation \geq 100%

PORTFOLIO OBEYA PROFILE



Both portfolio Obeya's followed a familiar setup: a cadence with regular portfolio reviews, performance panels tracking progress per initiative. Executive involvement at every cycle.

By any standard, these were well-functioning governance environments.

And yet, across 92 distinct metrics found in publicly available portfolio frameworks, approximately 95% answer the same question: how is this initiative progressing? The remaining 5%, financial selection tools like NPV and ROI, are designed for the entry gate. Once an initiative is approved, the legitimacy question is structurally retired.

Everything is designed to monitor and improve what is running. Nothing is designed to ask whether it should.

The initiatives that result from this gap, work that keeps running because nobody is asked whether it still should, are what this paper calls **Cold Cases**.



Cadence

Regular portfolio reviews with executive involvement and structured escalation.



Metrics

95% execution-oriented. Tracking progress, not continued relevance.



Missing

No event, no panel, no decision category for the existence question.

The result: Cold Cases.

WHY COLD CASES PERSIST

Metrics do their job, and that is precisely the problem. Once an initiative is tracked, continuation is the default. Stopping requires justification. Continuing does not. And the more visibly an initiative is committed to, the harder an explicit stop becomes.

When metrics optimise execution without forcing choice under scarcity, portfolio Obeya shifts from governance to commitment management.

AI accelerates this. The more sophisticated the dashboard, the easier it becomes to mistake refined execution signals for strategic relevance.



2x

Losses are weighed approximately twice as heavily as equivalent gains. Stopping an initiative feels like a loss. The freed capacity is abstract and arrives later. The trade-off is biased before the analysis begins.

CONTINUING

NOTHING REQUIRED.

STOPPING

JUSTIFICATION
VISIBILITY
EXPLANATION

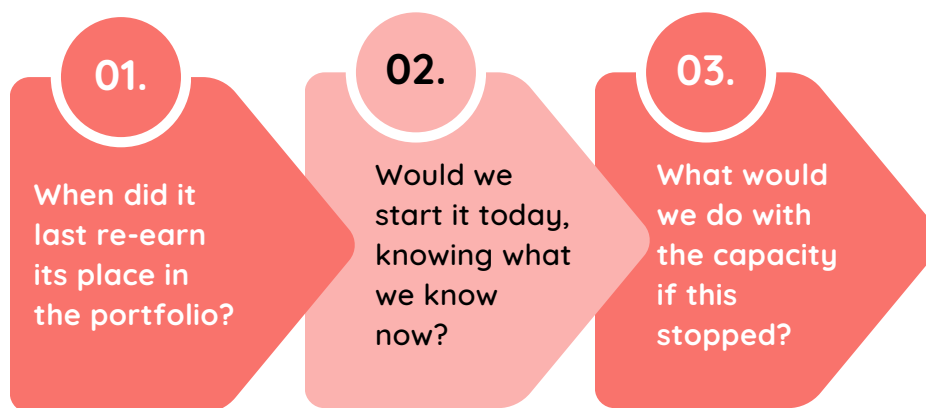
THE EXISTENCE REVIEW

The solution is not better metrics. It is not asking people to be braver. It is closing the design gap in the portfolio Obeya cadence by adding a dedicated event type: the **Existence Review**.

The Existence Review is structurally distinct from other portfolio events. Where those events ask how the work is going and what to adjust, the Existence Review asks one question only: "Does this initiative still deserve to exist?"

It is not a performance review. It does not evaluate progress. It evaluates continued strategic relevance.

Three outcomes are possible: continue, stop, or redesign. All three are legitimate governance acts, none of them is a failure.



A dedicated event does more than create a moment. It activates a different mode of thinking. Without an explicit cue to consider subtraction, the default holds.

The Existence Review is that cue.

HOW IT WORKS



The Existence Review

The Existence Review is a separate event, held quarterly.

It is deliberately kept apart from performance reviews.

In the portfolio Obeya, the Existence Review has its own panel, separate from performance. It tracks only one thing per initiative: when it last re-earned its place. Any initiative that has not re-earned its place within the past twelve months is automatically a candidate for the next Existence Review.

Additional Existence Reviews can be triggered in three situations:



Context shift

When strategic circumstances change significantly.



Overdue

When an initiative exceeds its planned duration.



The question in the room

When there is reason to doubt whether an initiative still deserves its place.

OUTCOMES & VALUE



Outcome per case

Case 1: Financial services.

- Four initiatives stopped or combined.
- Average lead time shortened from 34 to 31 weeks.

Case 2: Public sector IT

- Four initiatives stopped in flight within the first quarter.
- Average lead time shortened from 35 to 33 weeks.
- Dependencies decreased by approximately 20%.



When new priorities emerged, the portfolio conversation changed. The first question became whether existing commitments should be stopped, not how to absorb more work into an already saturated portfolio.

As a result, more strategic priorities could be resourced rather than queued.

These are early results from the first cycles. As the Existence Review becomes part of the regular cadence, each cycle surfaces new Cold Cases and increases the share of capacity directed at strategic work.

CLOSING THE GAP

The portfolio Obeya is designed to make choices visible. Its walls carry the full change agenda. Its participants are the decision-makers. Its events are built for governance at the highest level.

And yet, the most fundamental governance question, "should this initiative still exist?", has no place in the standard portfolio governance. That is not a leadership failure. It is a design gap.

The Existence Review gives the portfolio Obeya what it currently lacks: a dedicated event for the questions that metrics, dashboards, and performance reviews consistently leave unasked:

- When did this initiative last re-earn its place in the portfolio?
- Would we start this today, knowing what we know now?
- What would we do with the capacity if this stopped?

Closing the gap fully requires a dedicated existence panel and a quarterly review with its own agenda and its own place in your portfolio cadence. But identifying your first Cold Case does not.

In my session at the Obeya Summit, you will walk away with something practical to identify Cold Cases in your own portfolio. No governance redesign needed. You can start the following week.

The question is not whether your portfolio has Cold Cases. The question is whether your governance is designed to find them.