



**Institute of  
Commissioning &  
Assurance**

# WHY PROFESSIONALS ARE BLAMED FOR FAILURES THEY DO NOT GOVERN

**Issued by:** Institute of Commissioning and Assurance  
(ICxA)

Outcome Assurance is required as a governing layer to protect outcome accountability beyond project delivery.

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## Executive Summary

Across complex projects, failure is frequently attributed to the professionals closest to delivery. Engineers, project managers, commissioning teams, and operators are held responsible when outcomes fall short, even when they lacked the authority to govern the decisions that shaped those outcomes. This position paper explains why this misalignment persists and why Outcome Assurance is required to realign accountability with authority.

## Purpose and Scope

This paper is issued by the Institute of Commissioning and Assurance (ICxA) to clarify the structural distinction between professional responsibility and outcome governance. It is intended for sponsors, owners, executives, policymakers, and governance bodies responsible for defining accountability structures on major projects.

This paper does not challenge the competence or professionalism of delivery roles. Instead, it identifies a systemic governance failure that places accountability on individuals who were never empowered to govern outcomes.

## Accountability Without Authority

In effective governance systems, accountability and authority must be inseparable. A role can only be held accountable for outcomes it has the power to influence, authorize, or prevent.

In many project environments, professionals are assigned responsibility for technical delivery, execution management, or operational readiness, yet they are not granted authority over outcome definition, progression decisions, handover timing, or outcome acceptance. When outcomes fail, accountability is retrospectively assigned to those who executed the work rather than those who governed the decisions.

This misalignment is not accidental. It is embedded in how projects are structured and governed.

## **Delivery Roles Are Not Outcome Owners**

Most professional roles in projects are delivery-centric by design. Engineers design within approved parameters. Project managers manage execution against agreed baselines. Contractors deliver scope defined by contract. Operators receive assets once control is transferred.

None of these roles, by default, are mandated to govern whether the intended outcome is achievable, ready, or sufficiently assured before progression or closure. Yet when performance gaps emerge, these same professionals are questioned as though they held that authority.

This inversion of accountability places professionals in a position where responsibility exceeds authority.

## **Proximity Is Mistaken for Control**

Professionals closest to delivery are often blamed because their work is visible and measurable. Technical outputs can be reviewed. Execution decisions can be scrutinized. Operational performance can be observed.

Governance decisions, by contrast, are frequently collective, abstract, or implicit. They occur in approval forums, investment committees, or delegated authorities where responsibility is shared and rarely individualized.

When outcomes fail, proximity to the work is mistaken for control over the outcome.

## **The Silent Transfer of Outcome Risk**

A defining characteristic of outcome failure is the silent transfer of risk. Projects are advanced, handed over, or closed based on partial readiness, deferred integration, or optimistic assumptions. These are governance decisions, not delivery errors.

When deferred risks materialize in operation, accountability is shifted to those who inherit the system rather than those who authorized the transfer. Professionals become custodians of risk they were never empowered to reject.

## **Why Competence Alone Cannot Solve the Problem**

Organizations often respond to failure by demanding higher professional standards, additional training, or more rigorous procedures. While competence is essential, it cannot compensate for the absence of outcome governance.

No level of professional diligence can overcome undefined outcome acceptance criteria, ambiguous stage-gate authority, or pressure to progress without evidence. Without authority to halt or redirect decisions, professionals are expected to ensure success while being structurally unable to prevent failure.

## **Outcome Authority and the Realignment of Accountability**

Outcome Assurance introduces a formal Outcome Authority: a role mandated to protect outcome intent, authorize progression, and accept outcomes based on evidence of readiness. This role does not replace professional expertise but depends on it.

Professionals provide evidence. Outcome Authorities make authorization decisions. Accountability aligns with authority, and outcome risk is governed rather than inherited.

## Reframing Failure as a Governance Signal

Persistent outcome failure should not be interpreted as widespread professional inadequacy. It is a signal that governance structures do not protect outcome accountability.

Until accountability is aligned with authority, professionals will continue to absorb blame for decisions they did not control and risks they were not empowered to prevent.

Outcome Assurance reframes failure as a governance issue, not a professional one.