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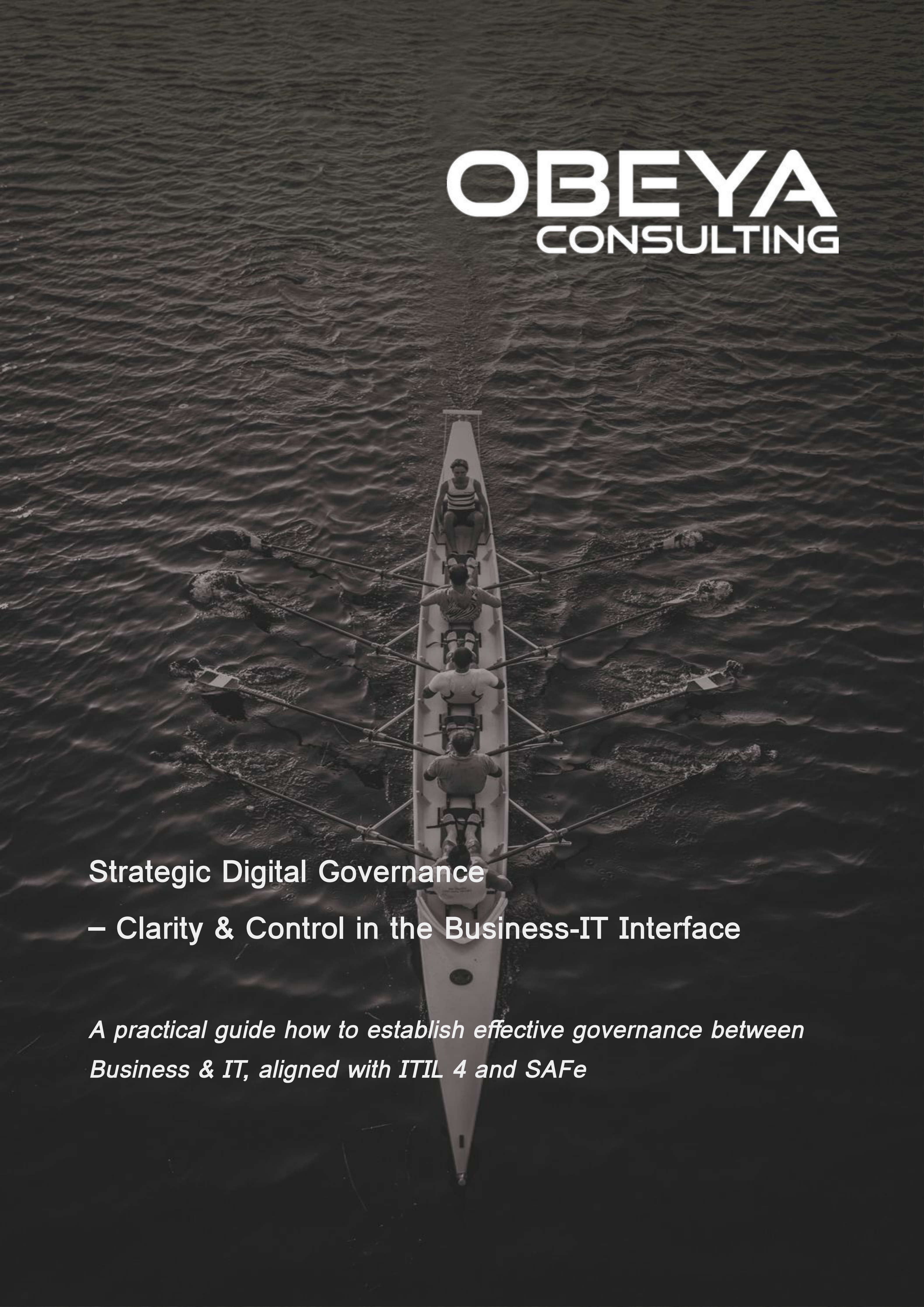

Strategic Digital Governance – Clarity & Control in the Business-IT Interface

A practical guide how to establish effective governance between Business & IT, aligned with ITIL 4 and SAFe

1. Executive Summary

Digital transformation is driving an unprecedented level of complexity in modern enterprises. Initiatives run in parallel, IT architectures evolve into hybrid models, and business models are subject to rapid, often disruptive change. Yet despite this dynamic environment, many transformation efforts stall when faced with a deceptively simple question: *Who makes the decisions – and based on which principles?*

In many organizations, the lack of structured decision-making mechanisms is a critical barrier. Business and IT often operate in parallel rather than in partnership. As a result, decisions are delayed, escalated, or improvised. The consequences are clear: operational overload, resource exhaustion, conflicting priorities, and a growing disconnect between strategy and execution.

> ***"According to Accenture, more than 80% of companies state that unclear responsibilities at the interface between business and IT lead to delays in digital transformation." (Accenture Technology Vision 2024)***

Governance provides the missing structure. Not in the sense of added bureaucracy, but as a clear framework that defines roles, responsibilities, decision paths, and shared strategic goals. Done right, governance fosters transparency, focus, and execution power across business and IT.

Compliance, in this context, is not merely about adhering to legal standards. It is the systematic assurance that all activities are traceable, auditable, and aligned with both internal policies and external regulatory frameworks. It turns accountability into a system, not just a principle.

ITIL 4 provides the foundation for service-oriented responsibility and operational excellence. **SAFe**, in turn, offers scalable frameworks for agile, value stream–oriented work across large organizations. Together, they enable structured, adaptive delivery models that align business goals with IT execution.

This guide outlines a pragmatic, phase-oriented approach to building digital governance. It supports CIOs and division leaders in shaping governance structures that reflect organizational maturity and strategic ambition. More than a theoretical concept, it delivers actionable methods, concrete steps, and critical insights to avoid common pitfalls along the way.

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2. Why Governance Is a Strategic Imperative

When decisions lack clarity, uncertainty follows – not just in IT projects, but across the entire business. In such an environment, teams hesitate, priorities drift, and execution suffers.

For years, many organizations equated governance with control, coordination, or compliance – a necessary bureaucracy that slows progress. Today, this perception is shifting. The absence of effective governance has become one of the primary reasons for project overruns, team burnout, and fragmented technology landscapes.

But governance is far more than the absence of confusion.
It is a multidimensional leadership framework that enables organizations to operate with direction, discipline, and alignment. At its core, governance is about guiding complex ecosystems toward common outcomes – across roles, functions, and domains.

Modern digital initiatives – from platform rollouts to end-to-end automation – are no longer linear or self-contained. They are interdependent, fast-moving, and deeply embedded in business value creation. Without a coherent governance structure, complexity spirals into dysfunction:

- Conflicting requirements arise as business units act autonomously.
- A decision vacuum forms where no one assumes ownership.
- Control over platforms, data flows, and budgets gradually erodes.

> ***“Only about a quarter of companies have implemented end-to-end digital governance - with significant consequences for control, prioritization, and strategic alignment.” (Source: Forrester Research)***

Effective governance is not an administrative burden. It is a leadership system.
It ensures that everyone knows their sphere of action, how decisions are prepared and taken, and how each initiative connects to a broader strategic vision.

This is where **ITIL 4** and **SAFe** contribute – each from a distinct but complementary angle:

	ITIL 4	SAFe
Purpose	Stability and service accountability	Agile scaling and value stream orientation
Focus	Operations, processes, And service lifecycle	Product development, Prioritization, and execution
Strength	Structure, reliability, role clarity	Speed, transparency, and decision cadence

Source: 2025, OBEYA-Consulting

When combined, these frameworks enable a governance model that balances stability with agility – connecting day-to-day operations with strategic steering.

3. The OBEYA - Governance Implementation Model

Phase 1 – Establishing the Current Governance Baseline

Before any structure can be introduced, clarity must be gained. Not through a high level analysis model or IT tool-based diagnostics, but through a clear-eyed assessment of how decisions are currently made, and where they are not.

This phase is about understanding the actual state of governance: where it is working, where it relies on informal norms, and where it breaks down. The goal is not to evaluate systems but to examine decision-making behaviors, responsibilities, and the real-world paths that decisions take across business and IT.

Objective of this phase

To develop a transparent picture of the current governance reality - identifying where clarity is missing, where routines dominate over reflection, and where decision-making creates friction instead of flow.

Guiding Questions – and why they matter

Each of the following questions is intended to provoke reflection. They are not just diagnostic tools, but catalysts for deeper insight:

- **Who is currently making which decisions - and based on what criteria?**
  This reveals informal power structures and unspoken rules that may bypass formal governance channels.
- **Where do escalation paths stall or become unclear?**
  This indicates friction points that can lead to decision delays, operational inefficiencies, or misaligned priorities.
- **How often do business and IT send conflicting signals on what's important?**
  Discrepancies in prioritization often signal missing alignment mechanisms or unclear strategic direction.
- **Which services or products are being delivered without clearly assigned responsibility?**
  Lack of ownership can lead to fragmentation, duplicated efforts, and quality risks.

Recommended Activities

- Conduct stakeholder interviews focused on decision-making behavior, not just formal processes
- Map typical escalation patterns (e.g., around change requests, incidents, or cross-functional conflicts)
- Visualize current decision-making paths to identify inconsistencies, gaps, and friction zones

Outcome

A realistic, shared understanding of how governance currently functions in day-to-day operations - an essential prerequisite for any targeted improvement.

Phase 2 – Aligning Governance with Services and Value Streams

Governance is only effective when it is focused on what truly creates value. Rather than organizing around systems or departments, modern governance models must align with services and value streams - the actual pathways through which customer outcomes are delivered.

This phase is about redefining the units of governance. Services, digital products, and value streams must be made transparent, outcome-oriented, and anchored in clear ownership. Only then can steering mechanisms be meaningful and impact-driven.

Objective of this phase

To establish governance structures that reflect operational reality - where value is created, who is accountable for it, and how resources are prioritized accordingly.

Guiding Principles

- **Identify the most business-critical services and digital products.**
  Focus governance where it matters most - on elements that directly contribute to customer experience or strategic differentiation.
- **Group these into operational value streams.**
  This allows for cross-functional coordination and visibility across the full lifecycle of value delivery.
- **Assign clear ownership roles - Service Owners, Product Managers, Value Stream Leads.**
  True ownership includes the authority to prioritize, allocate budget, and make trade-offs.

Critical Note

Ownership must not be symbolic. It must come with decision-making authority, responsibility for results, and the ability to influence upstream and downstream processes.

Outcome

A service-oriented structure where governance follows value - not hierarchy - and where strategic steering becomes both possible and actionable.

Phase 3 – Defining Roles and Decision-Making Bodies

Governance becomes real when it is lived by people - not abstracted through processes or frameworks. For decisions to be made consistently and effectively, there must be clarity around who decides what, in which forum, and with which mandate.

This phase is about anchoring governance in roles and boards, ensuring that each type of decision has its natural and rightful place - whether operational, strategic, or exceptional.

> ***„According to Gartner, more than half of CIOs report a misalignment between documented roles and actual decision-making behavior." (Gartner CIO Agenda)***

Objective of this phase

To create a living structure of accountability and dialogue, enabling decisions to be made close to the context, at the right level of the organization.

Guiding Principles

- **Define core governance roles** – such as Service Owners, Platform Architects, Product Managers, and Value Stream Leads.
  Each role should come with clear mandates and decision rights.
- **Establish a tiered board structure that is lean but effective.**
  Common types include:
  – *Portfolio Boards* for strategic prioritization and funding
  – *Architecture or Quality Councils* for technical coherence
  – *Service Review Boards* for operational performance and issue resolution

Advisory Note

Boards without decision rights become rituals without impact. Ensure each forum has a clear scope and a real mandate.

Outcome

A governance model where roles and forums are purpose-driven - ensuring that decisions are made efficiently, transparently, and with accountability.

Phase 4 – Define Roles and Governance Bodies

Governance becomes tangible when decisions have a natural place – whether in line management, projects, dedicated boards, or, by exception, at executive level. But this only works if governance is not defined solely through processes, but through assigned responsibilities and empowered roles.

Objective of this phase

To populate governance – not with abstract models, but with people in clearly defined roles, supported by purposeful decision-making structures. Governance must be anchored both in the business and in IT – and where necessary, in the systems themselves.

Clarifying role responsibility across business, IT, and systems
Effective governance begins in the business domain. Roles such as *Process Owner*, *Service Owner*, or *Value Stream Lead* carry the mandate for outcome accountability and prioritization. They define what needs to be achieved, why, and for whom.

IT roles such as *Product Manager*, *Platform Owner*, or *Solution Architect* operationalize this mandate by ensuring stable operations, robust architecture, and agile delivery. They serve as the link between business intent and technological execution.

Increasingly, IT systems themselves take on quasi-role-based behavior. For instance, they execute partial processes, automate workflows, and perform compliance checks. These functions may no longer be human-led but are still part of the organizational ecosystem. As such, governance must explicitly address the **human-machine interface**:

- Where does automated responsibility begin and end?
- When does human oversight intervene?
- What decisions can be delegated to algorithms, and which require contextual judgment?

This division of responsibilities must be made transparent. It ensures that automation serves the organization – and that governance is not blind to its own operational logic.

Synchronizing change: when business evolves, so must IT
A change in business – whether regulatory, strategic, or operational – invariably requires adjustments in IT structures. Governance is thus not a static overlay but a dynamic system: it aligns and adapts the interplay of people, processes, and platforms to ensure consistency, compliance, and performance.

Recommended actions

- Define clear governance roles across domains, including:
  – *Business*: Service Owner, Value Stream Lead, Process Owner
  – *IT*: Platform Owner, Product Manager, Solution Architect
- Clarify responsibilities of systems in automated processes
  – e.g. orchestration tools, approval engines, policy enforcement modules
- Build a lean yet effective board structure with clear mandates:
  – *Portfolio Board* (strategic steering, budget and prioritization)
  – *Architecture Council* (technical alignment, cross-domain standards)
  – *Service Review Board* (operational transparency and improvement)

Tip
Avoid boards that lack decision rights – they become rituals without impact. Every board needs a mandate, a cadence, and documented escalation paths.

Outcome
A role-driven governance architecture in which responsibilities are not only assigned but exercised – with clear ownership across business and IT, well-defined interfaces between humans and systems, and agile structures capable of adapting to change.

Phase 5 – Embed Governance Routines into Day-to-Day Operations

Governance cannot remain a concept. It must be lived – visibly, repeatedly, and reliably. Structure does not emerge from definitions alone. It emerges through rhythm: through disciplined routines that guide decision-making, build trust, and anchor accountability in daily practice.

> *Only 31% of companies have successfully embedded governance elements into their daily routines."*
> *(McKinsey, Digital Strategy Study 2023)*

Objective of this phase
To translate governance from model to behavior. By combining clearly defined roles with recurring steering mechanisms, governance becomes a system that not only maintains order but fosters motivation, ownership, and alignment.

From static models to living systems
Roles and responsibilities are important – but they are only the foundation. What brings governance to life is the *cadence* in which decisions are made, priorities are reviewed, and accountability is exercised. This rhythm gives structure its shape.

Governance routines provide:

- A **predictable operating model**, reducing friction and ambiguity
- A **framework for responsible autonomy**, enabling teams to act within clear boundaries
- A **platform for collaboration**, where human initiative is supported by IT capabilities
- A **vehicle for alignment**, linking operational actions with strategic goals

A corset that enables movement, not restriction

Effective governance defines who is responsible for what, how decisions are made, and when collaboration is required. It offers a stable framework that protects freedom of action - rather than constraining it. This clarity enables delegation of responsibility, fosters initiative, and enhances individual and team motivation.

Recommended actions

- Establish regular, purpose-driven steering routines:
  – *Service Reviews*: operational stability and issue resolution
  – *Portfolio Syncs*: alignment of strategic priorities and resource allocation
  – *Architecture Reviews*: managing complexity and ensuring coherence
- Use operational metrics to support factual, insight-driven decisions
- Define communication channels and escalation paths for consistency
- Create and communicate role profiles with defined decision zones, empowering action within governance

Tip

The most effective routines are short, focused, and actionable. Governance should not feel like reporting - it should feel like steering.

Outcome

Governance becomes a dynamic system of shared responsibility. It is practiced with consistency, reinforced by rhythm, and shaped by participation. People and systems interact within a governance corset that enables trust, self-direction, and strategic alignment. In this way, governance moves from documentation to culture - and becomes a core enabler of performance.

Phase 6 – Anchor, Evolve and Cultivate Governance

Objective of this phase

Governance is not a one-time installation. It must become a backbone - an invisible yet stabilizing framework that enables the organization to act with clarity, consistency, and adaptability. The goal is not to introduce governance but to institutionalize it.

Governance as structural resilience

Effective governance should not be felt as bureaucracy. It should be experienced as stability. When it is embedded deeply enough, it provides the organization with resilience in the face of disruption, clarity amid change, and orientation when decisions become complex.

Just like a spine in the human body, governance should carry the load silently - supporting movement, flexibility, and direction without becoming rigid or overbearing. A well-anchored governance system absorbs shocks, accommodates learning, and enables evolution.

More than control – a shared compass

Governance is not an end in itself. It is a means to create value through guided autonomy. It aligns diverse actors - business units, IT systems, leadership, and support functions - behind a common logic, enabling the organization to act coherently without micromanagement.

Governance should be seen as a **deep, guiding principle** of the organization, not as an administrative overhead. When this is understood and experienced, governance becomes part of the culture.

Recommended actions

- Establish regular governance feedback loops (e.g., every 3–6 months through lightweight assessments or pulse surveys)
- Review how roles are perceived, how decisions are made, and whether the system supports the intended outcomes
- Iterate on boards, routines, and mandates to reflect real-world needs and organizational learning
- Document and communicate visible improvements in clarity, speed, and effectiveness of decisions

From design to habit, from habit to identity

Governance becomes sustainable when it no longer needs to be explained. It is simply how the organization works. It enables a balance between reliability and change-readiness. It grows with the organization, adapts to its environment, and becomes a part of its DNA.

Outcome

Governance is no longer an external framework - it becomes an integral element of how the organization thinks, acts, and evolves. It provides the scaffolding for growth, the filter for change, and the discipline to keep moving in the right direction.

4. Barriers to Effective Governance – and How to Overcome Them

Building digital governance is not a technical deployment. It is a structural and cultural transformation of how an organization thinks, decides, and collaborates. For this reason, it's not tools or workflows that hold back progress - but ingrained mindsets, routines, and institutional reflexes.

Below are the five most common barriers to establishing effective governance - each described with practical ways to anticipate and dismantle them early.

Barrier 1 – Governance is misunderstood as control

In many organizations, the term "governance" carries political baggage. It conjures up images of bureaucracy, compliance bottlenecks, mandatory coordination - everything that seems to slow down change. As a result, governance is often merely tolerated in operational areas, not truly embraced.

> ***The mainpart of executives primarily associate governance with control rather than enablement.***
> ***(PwC CIO Pulse)***

What helps?
To break this perception, governance should not be introduced through processes or committees, but through its tangible effects: Governance brings clarity to priorities, accelerates decisions, and aligns responsibilities.

Show, early and clearly, what kind of tension governance helps resolve - whether it's project gridlock, misaligned releases, or unallocated budgets. Make success measurable by tracking metrics such as decision time, escalation rate, and service transparency. Governance should be experienced not as control, but as orientation.

Barrier 2 – Roles exist on paper, but not in practice

Many organizations document their roles with precision: Service Owners, Platform Managers, Value Stream Leads. But naming someone does not mean the role is truly lived. Often, roles are assigned "on the side" - without clear mandates, sufficient time, or decision space.

What helps?
Clarify roles not only by definition, but through empowerment. Every role must come with space to act, measurable objectives, and mutual expectations. Responsibility should not be assigned top-down - it should be shaped in dialogue: "What do you need to be effective in this role?" Embed governance roles into performance agreements and development conversations. That's how roles gain substance, not just labels.

Barrier 3 – Too many committees, too little decision-making

Committees are not the essence of governance. If governance feels like meeting inflation - with Portfolio Boards that can't make decisions or Service Reviews with no binding outcomes - it leads to frustration rather than control.

What helps?
Every governance body must have a purpose: Is it for review, decision, prioritization, or escalation? Each session should have a clear mandate, focused agenda, and visible impact. Fewer, stronger governance nodes are far more effective than a sprawling network of advisory groups with no teeth.

Barrier 4 – Operational urgency consumes governance capacity

Governance often fails not due to design, but due to daily operations. Under pressure, the first thing to go are steering routines: Service reviews are canceled, governance boards postponed, and decisions improvised on the fly.

> ***67% report that governance is frequently overrun by day-to-day business pressure.***
> ***(Forrester Research)***

What helps?
Embed governance routines into the leadership rhythm - not as extras, but as a core part of how the organization is managed. Decision-making meetings must be treated like key customer projects - because they safeguard value delivery. Leadership must enforce one discipline above all: If governance falls in times of urgency, then steering ability is lost precisely when it's needed most.

Barrier 5 – Business and IT operate in parallel, not in partnership

A common misconception is that governance is "an IT topic." It's not. Good governance translates strategic business objectives into concrete steering mechanisms across digital services.

When business functions are not integrated, governance becomes a technocratic exercise - detached from real outcomes and losing traction.

> ***According to a study it is noted that 71% of European IT and business executives believe that IT must be closely integrated with business strategy, but only 27% actually achieve this in their organizations."***
> ***(Time to raise the CIO's game, McKinsey)***

What helps?
Every governance board must include both business and IT representatives. Service Owners should act as **business–IT partners**, not just technical administrators. And most importantly, decisions must be tied to business outcomes, not technical implementations. Governance that ignores business is governance that fails to deliver.

What good governance overcomes

Strong governance identifies these hurdles early - and systematically removes their foundation.

In the end, governance is not about slowing down - it is about moving together, with focus, accountability, and purpose.

5. Critical Success Factors – What Makes Governance Effective

Many organizations claim to have governance structures in place and try to follow the established one. However, only a few truly manage to make governance work effectively. The distinction between having a governance framework and making it truly impactful doesn't lie in the concept itself, but rather in how it's implemented. How clearly are roles defined? How binding are decisions? And most importantly, how visible is the benefit that governance brings to the organization and its people?

In the upcoming chapter 5, we will explore the critical success factors that differentiate a governance framework from one that is merely theoretical to one that delivers tangible results. You will discover what makes governance not just a set of structures and roles, but a system that drives real impact - fostering clarity, accountability, and alignment across all levels of the organization. By addressing key factors such as ownership, routine, co-ownership between business and IT, and measurable outcomes, this chapter will help you understand what it takes to create a governance model that doesn’t just exist on paper, but works in practice to bring lasting value to the business.

1. Clear Ownership – Not Just on Paper

The best governance models fail when responsibility is distributed but not truly embraced. A "Service Owner" who lacks the time, KPIs, or authority to make decisions becomes a passive observer rather than an active driver.

What works?

- Link roles with measurable mandates.
- Understand governance roles as an integral part of leadership work - not as an additional task.
- Equip roles with real budget and decision-making authority.

Example: A Service Owner should not only be responsible for operations - they should also be empowered to evaluate change requests, steer roadmaps, and negotiate priorities with the business.

2. Governance Lives in Routines - Not Documents

Structure is not built through slides, but through rhythm.
Only when decisions are regularly prepared and made does trust in the system begin to form.

What works?

- Establish fixed, brief, and highly effective steering routines.
- Consistently document decisions - not for control, but for transparency.
- Regularly involve all relevant stakeholders in the governance cycle.

Practical Rule: It's better to have a 30-minute service review that occurs monthly than a 3-hour board meeting that no one takes seriously.

3. Governance Needs an Anchor in the Line Organization

Governance doesn't work if it only takes place in projects or the PMO.
It needs to be part of the line organization.

> ***According to BCG, in the article effective governance models, when embedded within the line organization, are critical to the success of agile transformations. (Outcome-Oriented Governance Unleashes Agile at Scale, BCG)"***

What works?

- Align governance roles with line functions.
- Actively involve leaders at the B1/B2 level in decision-making.
- Establish governance boards as part of overall steering - not as a side activity.

Example: If the department head in a portfolio board merely "listens to decisions that have been made" rather than actively participating in decision-making, the leverage for sustainable implementation is lost.

4. Business-IT Co-Ownership is the Standard - Not the Exception

The governance structure must reflect both sides of the organization - business and IT. Only together can you translate strategic goals into steerable services, roadmaps, and platform decisions.

What works?

- Develop shared role models (e.g., Value Stream Owner as a business + IT tandem).
- Define metrics that reflect both sides' interests (e.g., Time-to-Market and Service Stability).
- Make decisions where both impact and feasibility are understood.

> ***According to PwC, successful companies pursue a unified digital strategy between business and IT. (PWC, Lessons from Digital Leaders: 10 Attributes Driving Stronger Performance)***

5. Governance Demonstrates Impact - Not Just Structure

Governance that visibly improves processes is accepted. Governance that only manages will be bypassed.

What works?

- Regularly communicate the impact: e.g., decision rate, number of transparent change requests, time-to-decision.
- Position governance as a solution - rather than a set of rules.
- Make improvements visible through governance (e.g., fewer escalations, clear release planning, higher satisfaction).

6. Conclusion – Governance is Leadership Responsibility

Digital transformation is not just an IT project. It's a company-wide change process that is only as strong as its governance and control mechanisms.
When governance is reduced to a set of rules or checklists, its potential impact is often underestimated. Governance is not a rigid framework; it's the operating system of modern leadership. It's what drives clarity, alignment, and ultimately success in organizations striving for sustainable transformation.

Where governance is designed and implemented effectively, clarity emerges in critical areas:

- Clear objectives, ensuring everyone knows what they are working toward.
- Defined responsibilities, so accountability is embedded across teams.
- Transparent decision-making paths, reducing ambiguity and hesitation.
- Clear boundaries on what will be delivered - and, just as importantly, what will not.

The power of good governance is tangible:

- Strategies are not just discussed, they are acted upon, with clear deliverables and timelines.
- Business and IT are no longer working in silos but as integrated partners, moving toward common goals.

- Decisions are made decisively, not delayed, with well-defined roles and responsibilities to drive them forward.

The integration of frameworks like ITIL 4 and SAFe provides a robust foundation for stable services, transparent roles, and structured operations. ITIL 4 ensures that the infrastructure remains reliable, while SAFe offers agile decision-making and value-driven workflows, helping governance remain adaptive and responsive. Together, these frameworks create a model that works not just for large enterprises, but for any organization aiming to deliver real, measurable value through digital initiatives.

Ultimately, the most important lesson is that governance is not a static concept but a dynamic and evolving process. A strong governance model doesn’t merely set rules - it empowers teams, facilitates collaboration, and ensures that everyone, from business to IT, is aligned toward achieving the organization’s strategic objectives. The next step is clear: take the principles outlined in this document, adapt them to your own context, and start implementing governance that doesn’t just guide, but drives meaningful change.

Note on Editorial Optimization

This text originates from a manually drafted version created by the OBEYA-CONSULTING team. All content is based on our daily routines and our long term experience with customers in the OBEYA business domains.
AI-based tools were employed to refine linguistic clarity, ensure a consistent, reader-friendly tone, and support a professional yet accessible style.
As the authors are not native English speakers, idiomatic expressions and culturally specific phrasing were deliberately minimized to enhance international readability and neutrality.
AI was also utilized for quality assurance purposes – specifically for the detection and correction of grammatical, spelling, and punctuation errors.
Full responsibility for the content, messaging, and final approval remains solely with the authors.
The photo on the first page is taken from https://unsplash.com/, Matteo Vistocco