Part B

LESSON 5

Website Manager's Masterclass

Masterclass Part B - Contents

A new vision of management

In the final section of the *Masterclass for Web and Product Managers* Part-A, you learned how to measure the performance of any system of **Web Governance** by tracking three broad indicators. These were:

1. Online: This category represents your ability to meet the minimum needs of site visitors and includes things like content quality, usability, accessibility, etc.

2. Operational: Indicators in this category show how well you can meet the needs of internal customers/stakeholders. They encompass such things as quality of communications, cost overruns, project turnaround times, etc.

3. Organisational: These indicators stand for your ability to meet the requirements of the enterprise overall—where growing staff turnover or heightened business risk could be suggestive of management imbalance.

The idea is that these indicators represent features that are most susceptible to flawed management.

As such, whenever instability occurs, these indicators can signal that something is wrong and help provide the evidence you need to build a **Business Case** for transformation.

And yet, even with such evidence, senior management is often incredibly slow to change.

Part of the reason is that there is so little literature about Web Governance to go on, that the risks of getting it *"wrong"* outweigh the benefits of even trying.

The result is prevarication, delay and (eventually) complete breakdown.

3 Critical Factors

So that's the bad news.

But the good news is that recent years have revealed some great examples of organisations that have finally begun to master Web Governance.

What these have shown is that—at its core—success in online management depends overwhelmingly on just **3 Critical Factors**. As you may recall from *Part A Lesson 4* these are:

1. Clarity of vision

Vision ensures that you (and everyone else) knows for certain how ownership, leadership and authority will work.

2. Balanced operations

Balancing operations means that everyone has access to the resources needed to expedite their online burden.

3. Commitment

A firm and unyielding commitment to making things happen, not only makes change inevitable—but preferable.

This simple triad adds much-needed structure to arguments about how to implement better governance and can help short-cut the type of endless deliberation that can delay action—action that is desperately needed on many sites, particularly those that are *Mid-Large* in Scale.

Indeed, *Mid-Large* Scale sites are now so common (particularly US state-scale and European national-scale bodies, including government agencies, universities and non-profits) and have such similar governance issues, that they could be said to be typical of the market.

Scale redux

In *Lesson 2* we learned that Scale is a measure of the **Complexity**, **Size** and levels of **Engagement** of an online presence. Scale helps determine how to configure the *Activities and Resources* of Web Governance into a workable system of control.
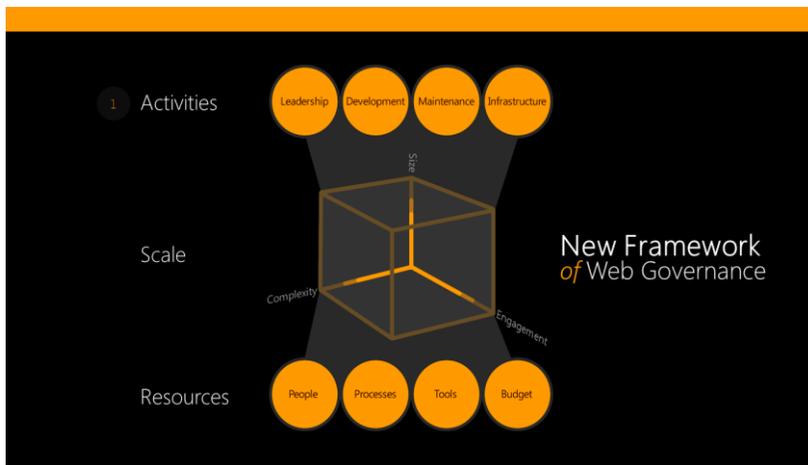
For example, a *Mid-Large* scale online presence is one that reflects the following characteristics:

- It is technically very complex and supports many transactional services.

- It has high traffic (between 750,000 to 1m visitors per month) with lots of commentary, engagement and social media interaction.

- It hosts content equivalent to 7,500—10,000 standard pages (with more added daily).

- And finally, it depends on a team of between 8-12 Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs) and a budget of $1-2 million+ per year.

Yet, even an operation like this which may ostensibly seem well supported, often suffers from many instabilities that clog up the works.

And it's not always about money.

If important things like leadership, ownership, authority, team structures, roles, responsibilities, policies, standards, processes and tools do not keep pace with volumes, complexity and overall ambition—the chances that something important will go wrong remain high.

To see how bad it can get, let's pick-up again the story of our favourite mid-scale operation *Mom-n-Pop's* diner (as introduced in *Part-A* of the *Masterclass*) to see how it has coped as its online operations expanded.

Mom-n-Pop (2.0)

As you may remember, *Mom-n-Pop* grew very fast and soon established itself as a popular East-Coast franchise.

As this happened, it became clear that the original *1-man-band* system of web management (under the tutelage of Junior, *Mom-n-Pop's* son) could no longer work.

The expansion in content, regional sites, an online ordering service, a mobile-specific site, a specialist ordering app, a Facebook presence, Twitter, YouTube, etc.—made things far too complex and time-consuming for one person alone.

It was therefore agreed that Junior could hire some additional specialists to help out. This included a UX designer, some writers and an analytics guy.

Junior also implemented a new **Content Management System** (CMS) to help with publishing and so that regional staff could update their own pages.
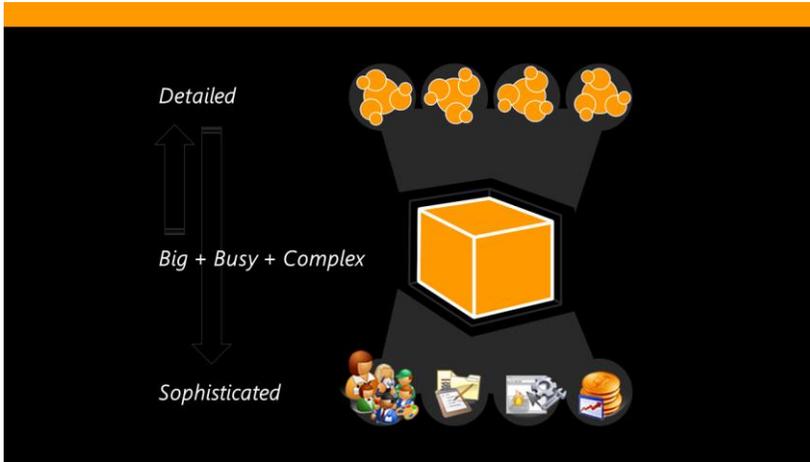
And finally, the Web Team itself was migrated out of its original home in *IT* and into *Communications*.

The idea was that by shifting away from the technical side of digital and closer to the hub of customer engagement, the online experience could be improved.

(However, one important caveat to this move was that all development/coding staff would remain in IT.)

In fairness to Junior, considerable time and effort went into ensuring a smooth transition—and notwithstanding a few minor issues, at first everything seemed to work out well.

The increased headcount meant Junior could step back from the minutiae of day-to-day admin and take on more of a strategic role.

In addition, being freed of responsibility for technical issues allowed extra time to be spent on the user experience and improving content.

But sadly, any benefits were short-lived.

Law of unintended consequences

The constant ambition of *Mom-n-Pop* to do more online soon soaked up any slack in Junior's team.

In fact, all the internal publicity about "*remodelled web processes*" only seemed to entice the business to demand more.

Before long Junior found himself back where he started; snowed under with requests for new features of ever greater complexity — but with one cruel twist.

Despite all the effort put into planning a smooth transition, the status of his new relationships with IT and the regional managers had never really been pinned down.

For instance, Junior found he had to often plead with IT to secure a bare minimum of coding support, as well as intervene in arguments between regional managers and his staff over who does what.

Despite all the money that had been spent on new staff and technology, it was clear that the real challenge of defining ownership and control had been largely ignored.

With little or no interest from above, *Mom-n-Pop* soon started to display the classic symptoms of governance dysfunction. For example:

- Ill-defined web authority, causing continual arguments over ownership.

- Poor interdepartmental relationships leading to development delays.

- Undocumented processes creating tension among staff and confusion over outcomes.

- Inadequate leadership that leaves web operations out on a limb.

- And a constantly growing gap between the demands of the business to do more and availability of resourcing to respond.

What a mess!

In fairness to Junior (and to wrap up our story), as soon as he recognised these problems, he started to lobby senior management to restore order — in particular to clarify ownership, leadership and authority.

The difficulty was that after the retirement of his mom and dad (the eponymous founders of *Mom-and-Pop*), no one really cared enough to listen.

As far as the new executive team was concerned everything was fine. They had some great looking websites, some cool apps and a busy Twitter feed.

And besides it was only the web! It's not like a problem in online could cause any real damage.

Right?

Wrong.

Too much, too soon

The ultimate trigger for change was an incident in late 2015, whereby a regional manager with CMS access accidentally published *Mom-n-Pop's* innovative new 2016 menu three months early.

This mistake was quickly picked up on Twitter and shared hundreds of times.

Thankfully any resulting reputational damage was limited as most fans were simply excited by the new recipes.

However it badly undermined a costly marketing campaign planned for the new year and gave competitors plenty of time to react.

The post mortem conducted by senior management revealed that (notwithstanding human error) there was very little Junior could have done to prevent this incident occurring.

There was simply too much going on of too great a complexity for the Web Team to cope.

In a sense, this disaster was not a bug—but a feature of a critically unstable system of online governance. Failure had been ***designed-in***.

And the executive team itself could not dodge responsibility.

By ignoring Junior's legitimate requests for early intervention, they were ultimately responsible.

The obvious next question then is how Junior can turn things around.

Or put it another way—what can you do to prevent a similar event occurring in your organisation?

Never let a good crisis go to waste

Well, if failure can be *designed-in*, it can also be *designed-out*.

The answer relies on senior management coming to their senses about the requirements of governance.

It just not sensible any more for an executive team to persist with the fantasy that a **large, highly ambitious and highly complex** online presence can be supported by an under-resourced or toothless Web Team.

If an organisation wants a high quality web presence, it must commit to providing the resource and rules to make things happen.

Naturally, it would be great to get this message across without the need for some nasty catastrophe, but if that's what it takes … as the old saying goes, "*never let a good crisis go to waste*".

Anyway embarrassment has a curious way of making people sit up and take notice

In any event, whenever your management team does start to listen, you need to make sure you have a plan ready to go based on the **3 Critical Factors of Success**.

To see what this may look like, let's now explore each of the factors in turn to learn how good governance can work in practice — starting with that most basic requirement of all: your operational ground rules.

A new vision

A good vision for Web Governance delivers two things:

- First, it ensures that those responsible for managing online (and everyone else) knows what they are ultimately for.

- And second it gives a Web Team a justified sense of purpose in making things happen.

In the absence of such a vision, a team with no clear understanding of its objectives or confidence in its ability will not be taken seriously and be unable to provide the stability needed to support operations—with all the symptoms typified by *Mom-n-Pop*.

Such a lack of formalisation in online authority is one of the most dogged hangovers from the early internet.

For far too long, little thought was given to such things because the web was much too "*groovy*" for such square thinking.

But no longer.

As we have learned, a new generation of leaders for whom online is neither cool nor cryptic is now being appointed to positions of authority.

These executives have lifted the lid on digital management and discovered just how poorly operations are organised.

To set things right they need to build a new system of control—one that can deliver clarity for things like web ownership, leadership and authority.

"We the people…"

Articulating a vision for online management does not require a huge or unwieldy bureaucracy, just a clear statement of intent that is widely circulated.

For example, the vision for GDS (or *Government Digital Services*, the team set-up to manage the new GOV.uk portal) was stated original stated in the foundational strategy written by Martha Lane Fox to have "*absolute*

authority over the user experience across all government online services and the power to direct all government online spending."

This document is <u>available on the GDS website</u> and represents an elegant example of how such a mandate can be expressed.

But of course, just because you have some nicely worded documents doesn't mean people will buy in.

The truth is that things will only ever change if they are backed-up with the clear and visible support of senior management.

Indeed, if you see watch any of the videos that feature Martha on the GOV.uk site a point she keeps coming back to is that (alongside the authority to get things done) she was given the support of the British cabinet to ensure nothing could get in her way.

As the digital transformation analyst Didier Bonnet at Cap Gemini has it, *"when it comes to governance, senior executive engagement is essential."*

This is such a crucial point, it is worth emphasising.

For governance to change, senior management **must commit** AND **be seen to commit** to making it happen.

In their absence any efforts at transformation are **doomed** to failure—and for obvious reasons.

All systems of both (formal) power and (informal) privilege flow from the interests and concerns of senior decision makers.

If they are known to take Web Governance seriously—well, so too will everyone else.

That is why the support of executive is so critical, particularly when it comes to redefining "embedded" structures or the practices of long-standing Web Teams.

Service Leader teams as an exemplar

As we saw in the last lesson, *Service Leader* teams have emerged as the most common model of online control.
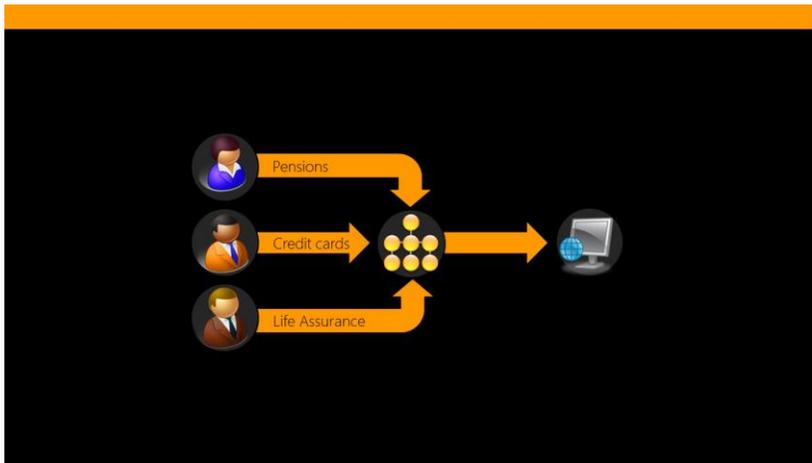
Such a body acts as a standalone entity with responsibility for all aspects of digital capability to which every part of a business must refer. (The GDS team is perhaps the best example of such an entity.)

And yet, common and all as such teams are, such an idealised form of central ownership may not be appropriate (or even possible) in your circumstances.

Unlike government (which is by nature very hierarchical) many institutions are far more messy.

Consider again the situation of *Mom-n-Pop*.

Not only is it far smaller in scale than a national government, it is much less organised.

While the London-based GDS team is huge (with 300+ staff overseeing the work of 1,000 web publishers who maintain 120,000 pages of content), *Mom-n-Pop* must make everything happen with just 15 FTEs.
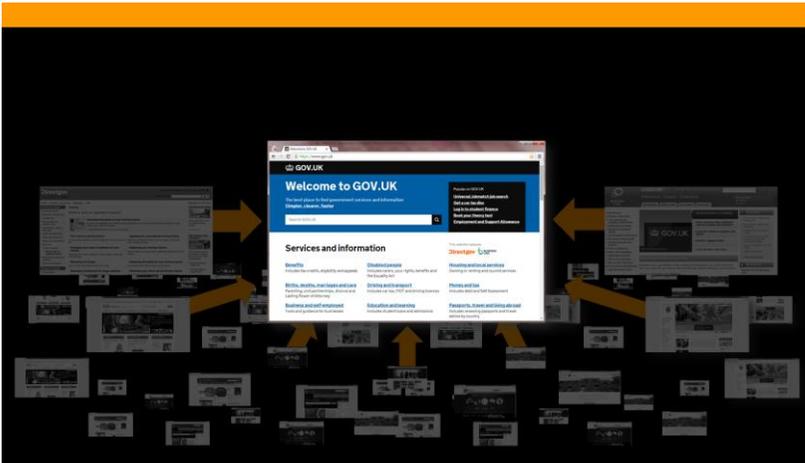
In addition, *Mom-n-Pop* is not even close to the point where it would make sense to separate out *Web* as a completely standalone body (on a par with *IT*, Finance, *HR* or *Communications*).

Nevertheless, as a general vision, there is a clear case for concentrating power into a distinct web unit.

Centralisation typically results in greater operational certainty, a more consistent online experience and (for most elements at least) a more efficient use of scarce resources.

So although complete separation may not be on the cards, a clearer statement about ownership, leadership and authority for web is justified.

In the case of *Mom-n-Pop*, this could be expressed as follows:

Ownership

The Web Team is given rights to and has ultimate title over all digital content and services — including final say over everything that goes online.

Authority

The Web Team is granted the permission to make any necessary decisions about how the management of activity and how resource are allocated, in order to ensure operational stability.

Leadership

The Web Team is conferred with special responsibility to maximise how digital technology is used to support of business value, with an advisory role to Senior Management in this regard.

Inevitably, each of these elements may be qualified in various ways—such that aspects of the overall mandate are shared with other bodies to a greater or lesser extent, e.g. with *IT* or *Communications*.

In addition, checks-and-balances on the power of the Web Team are also a good idea to help keep everyone aligned and (perhaps) forestall megalomania.

Indeed, a hard lesson learned by many teams is that the centralisation of authority and ownership is a double-edged sword.

Contrary to expectations, centralisation does not reduce the answerability of the Web Team to the rest of the business—it actually increases it!

Sure, your Web Team may now have total command over previously independent units —but it is precisely because these formerly units must now come to you for service, that you must be more reactive than ever.

This is particularly evident in entities like government where inflexible systems imposed by *"those clowns in Head Office"* can actually limit online success rather than progress it.

To prevent this happening, a strategy called **"subsidiarity"** is useful for bringing internal stakeholders with you.

Subsidiarity

The principle of subsidiarity states that *"those things that are best done locally should continue to be done locally, whilst specialist skills and resources are marshalled by a central team for the benefit of all."*

This might mean that in an organisation with many regional sites (like *Mom-n-Pop*) devolved teams can continue to publish their own material—but only so long as core elements like user experience and technology are sourced from the Web Team.

Such a mandate—clearly and firmly promulgated by senior management—can broadly settle any debate about online.

And yet, as you may have noticed, that neither this renewed vision for governance nor the definitions of ownership, leadership and authority, say anything about in which department *Web* should reside.

The question remains: where should such a powerful team be placed? In *IT*? Or *Communications*? Why not *Marketing*?

As we have seen there are no hard-and-fast rules of who which best.

The only thing that matters is that the executive responsible can deliver in an unbiased way for the entire organisation—and not just their own department.

(The checks and balances we referred to earlier, are important in this regard and we'll explore them more in a moment.)

Evidence from the market indicates that *IT, Marketing and Communications* remain most popular—simply because that is where the bulk of online skills reside, such as code, content and design.

All the same, even if one team (say *Communications*) is given ownership of *Web*, some important resources may remain elsewhere, perhaps in IT. And for reasons of politics, performance or simple expediency, it may not be desirable to change arrangements in the short term.
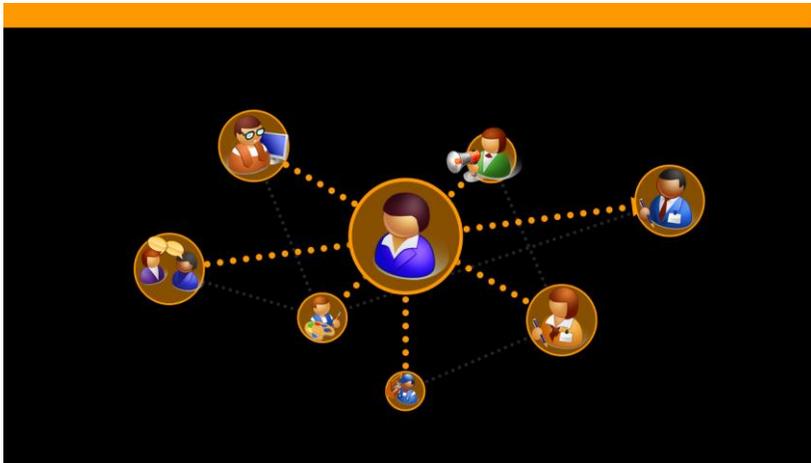
The challenge then is to create a system such that the Web Team can continue to deliver a high standard of stability, even if it is diluted by incomplete command over all the Activities or Resources of governance.

And, again, there is no reason in principle why this cannot work.

As we saw in a previous lesson, interdepartmental relationships in some organisations are so good that all that is really needed is a gentleman's agreement for staff or other assets to be shared as necessary.

But admittedly, that is not all that common.

As *Scale* grows, what were once shared agenda tend to split apart, making co-ordination harder and harder.

What may then happen is that, say, the IT department (which has no direct ownership of online and thus is not measured by its performance) focuses more on its own work and lends out Developers only grudgingly.

If such a situation is combined with poor communications or byzantine methods of project management—even the most resilient of *Web Managers* can be stymied by the difficulties of trying to get things done.

Nevertheless, you can still retain a legitimate expectation that everything you need to get the job done will be provided—and that includes the support of IT (or other).

And while you yourself may not be able to *make* the IT team co-operate, Senior Management sure can.

In fact, it is instances like this (when a new mandate for operations is being questioned) that C-level executives get to prove their commitment to their vision for Web Governance, by short-cutting resistance and insisting on co-operation.

With a modicum of goodwill (and perhaps a little arm-twisting), procedures for cross-functional resourcing can be worked out.

For example, a variation on the concept of an SLA—called an *Operational Level Agreement (OLA)* or *Charter of Understanding*—can be used to define

basic terms of support, including response times to requests and minimum levels of quality.

The benefit for you as a *Web Manager* is that—just like a contract with an external provider—you then know what you are getting.

Similarly, for your supplier they knows what they have to fulfil and can plan the deployment of staff accordingly.

And if things do break down?

Well, even with the best systems in the world, it is simply a part of life that differences will emerge from time to time—whether driven by lack of resource or simple disagreements over priority.

In such a case, a mechanism of checks-and-balances is needed so that competing views can be discussed and decisions made.

A popular means to this end is to constitute a form of **Web Steering Group (WSG)** whose role it is to facilitate decision making between many completing interests and maintain a degree of *"online peace"*.

Web Steering Group

A typical *Web Steering Group* is composed of senior representatives of all departments with a stake in web and chaired by the Executive within whose remit operations reside—be that Communications, IT or other.

The best group is one that can truly unify disparate opinions and act in a collegial way. And the ability and interest of the chairperson is making this work is crucial.

Although this person has many powers for how online may work, the greatest part of his/her time is likely to be spent on *persuasion* rather than on ruthlessly enforcing decisions.

As we will see in *Lesson 7* of *Part B*, leadership is about bringing people with you because they **prefer** that you lead—rather than brow beating them into submission.

And this narrative also works in reverse

A governance system that values *debate-over-combat* lessens the temptation for the Web Team to *"go it alone"* by prioritising its own objectives over the greater good.

Experience suggests that convening once every quarter is about adequate and among the topics covered includes:

- To agree forthcoming developments priorities, which may include arbitration between conflicting projects.

- To review governance issues, including new policies, standards or procedures.

- To advise and support the senior management team in creating online strategy.

So we see that a properly constituted Web Steering Group can help keep interests aligned, keep activity focused on goals—and act as a *"Court of Last Resort"* where frustrations can be aired.

Mom-n-Pop WSG

Naturally, the status and strength of a SG varies considerably from organisation to organisation—though, using our example of *Mom-n-Pop* we can speculate on what one may look like.

In this instance, although the senior management team in *Mom-n-Pop* wants *Web* to take the lead in all online, it also values the consultative function provided by a Steering Group—particularly in keeping regional managers onside.

Accordingly, it has been decided that even though Junior's team will retain the lion's share of tactical and strategic competence—mandates for substantial development or other significant decisions will first have to be agreed by a majority in the Web Steering Group.

As you might expect, this begs the question of what happens if agreement cannot be reached. Does activity come to a standstill?

Of course not.

It could be that the chairperson retains senior decision making power, or—if that is not politically workable—that issues are escalated to the ultimate authority from which all power in Web Governance flows, the Senior Management Team itself.

Senior Management Team

As you know, a *Senior Management Team (SMT)* is the highest-ranking administrative group within an organisation, which (depending on how it is legally constituted) may be chaired by a Chief Executive Officer or Managing Director.

The classic role of an SMT in online (aside from setting strategy) is to ensure that the resources (people, budget, etc.) needed to achieve Goals are in place.

Other than that, the SMT may have only very intermittent involvement with web (aside from adjudicating on rare instances of escalated disagreement).

And yet, as the final authority for all operations, everything in governance **must** ultimately be addressed to and be confirmed by this team.

That is why it is so important that if and when you are finally able to attract its attention (perhaps as the result of a compelling business case or more likely following some online catastrophe) you can win support for a renewed governance vision.

What you are looking for are 3 things.

#1. Abandon wishing thinking

Firs, if they are serious about *designing-out* failure and delivering competitive advantage, that is what they must do.

They must acknowledge the need to abandon wishing thinking about operations and guarantee that online ambition will **always** be balanced by investment in the resources and leadership needed to make it happen.

After all, that is what the essence of a renewed vision for governance is about.

#2. Imprimatur to change

Second, equipped with this vision, your SMT must approve whatever concrete changes in online ownership, leadership and authority are needed to make things happen.

Needless to say, you'll need a complete plan ready for review, including justifications for any new roles, team changes and more.

Sure, it's a lot of work but all you really need at the end is their imprimatur. And, anyway, the reward for your effort comes in what follows.

#3. Back-up

Having secured agreement to the first and second requirements, the third and final thing you need is a firm commitment that the SMT will back you up in the implementation of this new vision.

As indicated before, the best support is that which is most visible, for example, an email from the CEO to all staff … *"I now anticipate the cooperation of everyone in making this transformation happen and will be directly involved in pushing through change where required."*

Get something like that and the way to success is clear!

And with that in mind, let's assume for our test case of *Mom-n-Pop*—that's what Junior has managed to achieve.

After the disaster of the mispublished menu, his senior management teams has recognised their failings and firmly committed to a new vision for governance.

This includes an expanded mandate for the Web Team in online ownership, leadership and authority (though with aspects of staffing shared with IT) and a consultative role for a new Steering Group.

So, now all Junior has to do is make it happen.

And is it this practical part of Web Governance that most attention is focussed for the simple reason that —in order to build a working system of management—you need answers to practical questions:

- How many staff to hire, with what skills?

- How to allocate roles and responsibilities?

- What processes to change and how?

- What tools to acquired and for what purposes?

- How much to spend on it all?

In our next lesson we'll delve into these questions in detail by examining the second (and most specialised) of the **3 Critical Factors of Governance Success**: building balanced operations.

[Continue to Part B: Lesson 6]
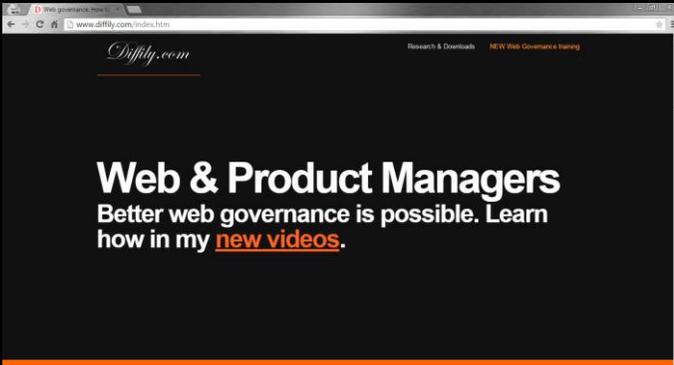
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