

AI GOVERNANCE

Governance theatre is what fear looks like on a slide

Policies written to produce the feeling of control survive a board meeting and fail an audit. Three tests separate a control from a performance.

Terence Kok

Three things this covers

1 Where theatre comes from

A frightened board asks for something it can approve by the next meeting.

2 What it looks like

Four common forms, each a sensible thing standing in for a control.

3 How to tell the difference

Three plain tests any board member can apply, drawn from ISO/IEC 42001 audit work.

Theatre manages the fear of the people approving AI

A director reads about an AI incident and asks whether it could happen here. Nobody can say for certain.

The governance team has five weeks. What can be produced in five weeks is a document. It is approved, the room feels better, and the AI systems are unchanged.

75%

have AI usage policies setting
out what is permitted

48%

monitor production AI for
accuracy, drift and misuse

Gradient Flow 2025 AI Governance Survey, sponsored by
Pacific AI, 351 respondents, February to May 2025.

34%

**of organisations with an AI
governance policy regularly audit for
unsanctioned AI**

IBM and Ponemon Institute, Cost of a Data Breach Report 2025, 600 organisations. The rule exists. Nothing checks against it.

Four common forms of governance theatre

1 The principles poster

Right words that tell nobody what to do differently on Monday.

2 The committee that has never said no

An approval rate close to 100%.

3 The amber risk register

Every risk rated medium, so nothing requires action.

4 The reviewer who approves everything

Hundreds of sign-offs a day, a handful of rejections a year.

THE RECORD TEST

Ask for the record that shows the control ran last month

Last month's use-case reviews. Last month's drift report, and who read it.

A real control leaves a trace every time it runs. A performance leaves a policy and an approval date, and then nothing.

THE STOP TEST

Ask who can stop an AI system, and when they last did

The person is named, the authority is written into their role, and they can switch it off without convening a meeting.

If nobody has ever stopped anything, ask why not.

THE FINDING TEST

Ask for a finding the control produced that changed something

A control that has never found a problem is either working over a perfect system or not looking. Perfect systems are rare.

How leadership treats the first finding decides whether a second one is ever reported.

Ask when a control last stopped something.

Read part 5 of The Fear Layer at terencekok.com



Terence Kok · AI & Innovation Strategist

SAVE · COMMENT · FOLLOW