Ethics as Leadership Infrastructure: A Special Edition on the Chief Project Officer Role

Interview with Ming Yeung [1]

Adjunct Professor
Portfolio Manager & Program Director
Project Delivery & Product Owner
Finance and Governance Professional
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

by Aina Aliieva (Alive)
International Correspondent, PM World Journal
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Introduction to Interviewee

Ming Yeung is a passionate educator and a seasoned professional in project planning, execution, and control. He is a Compliance Manager (contract) and an Acting CCO/CRO with a fintech crypto blockchain startup where he co-manages its public listing on Canadian Securities Exchange since August 2022 and a part-time adjunct professor with several academic institutions since April 2024. With over 20 years of progressive experience in the financial industry, Ming commenced his career as an analyst with two major banks in Toronto and progressed into senior management

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roles by two multinational insurers in Hong Kong and Singapore where he offered risk advisory, compliance oversight, program directorship, project delivery, and product ownership, and portfolio management.

Ming had many successful academic endeavours where he received his Bachelors from University of Toronto and Brock University and Masters from Dalhousie University and Osgoode Hall Law School. As a fervent believer in lifelong learning and continuous improvement, he also acquired many professional designations, such as CFA, FRM, PMP, FCSI, AICB, CSM, CSPO, PFP, PTS, FMA, and CIM et cetera. He is a frequent contributor on the topics of ethics and ethical behaviours at PMI Ethics Bistro and Project Management Central sites.[2] He can be contacted at bl292@hotmail.com.

Introduction to Interview

This interview serves as a special edition and companion to the book *The Evolution of the PMO: Rise of the Chief Project Officer*.

In the book, we explored the emergence of the Chief Project Officer role through multiple lenses — organizational complexity, historical evolution of the PMO, structural challenges, leadership trends, the impact of artificial intelligence, and the future trajectory of the profession. The focus was intentionally broad and forward-looking, aimed at positioning the CPO as a strategic executive role rather than an operational extension of project delivery.

In doing so, however, we overlooked a topic that is both foundational and unavoidable: **ethics**.

Ethics sits beneath every decision architecture, governance model, and leadership structure we described — yet it was not explicitly examined in the publication. Ming Yeung, a member of PMI's Global Ethics Advisory Team (formerly Ethics Insight Team), rightly pointed this out during our conversations. Unfortunately, by that time, the manuscript had already progressed beyond the point where substantive changes could be made.

Rather than treating this as a footnote or a post-publication correction, I chose a different approach.

This interview and accompanying article are intended to function as a **special edition** — not as an addendum, but as a deliberate continuation of the conversation. While it could not be included in the book, it addresses a dimension of leadership and governance that deserves focused attention, particularly as organizations accelerate technologically and structurally.

Ethics is not a peripheral concern for Chief Project Officers, project leaders, or executives. It shapes how power is exercised, how technology is used, how decisions are justified, and how trust is sustained under pressure. In many ways, it is the quiet infrastructure that determines whether systems hold — or fail — over time.

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[2] ProjectManagement.com - Falsified by AI, Rectified by Ethics: Project Managers at the Crossroads; https://www.projectmanagement.com/blog-post/79206/falsified-by-ai--rectified-by-ethics--project-managers-at-the-crossroads

This conversation with Ming Yeung is therefore not a retrospective fix, but a necessary extension. It explores ethics not as compliance, but as professional competence, leadership responsibility, and systemic design — precisely the dimensions that define the modern Chief Project Officer role.

Q1.   Revisiting ethics in light of rapid technological change. Given the rapid advancements in technology and evolving organizational structures discussed in your article on the Ernst & Young case, how do you recommend professionals and organizations adapt their ethical frameworks to stay relevant and maintain integrity?

Ming: That's an excellent starting point. By way of background, I'm a certified PMP and a member of PMI's Global Ethics Advisory Team (formerly Ethics Insight Team). Our mandate is to promote awareness, effectiveness, and ethical practice across the entire project management community — from students and candidates to certified professionals and volunteers.

One of our initiatives is the *Ethics Bistro*, where we publish monthly articles on emerging ethical issues using real-world cases and storytelling. The Ernst & Young case you referenced is a strong example. In that situation, some employees attempted to shortcut mandatory continuing education by running multiple training sessions simultaneously on different devices. While technologically possible, it clearly violated professional and ethical expectations.

This case highlights why organizations must actively revisit ethics in light of technological advancement. I recommend five key actions:

1. **Regularly update policies** to reflect new technologies and modern work practices.
2. **Embrace flexibility** by creating ethical guidelines that can adapt to new situations rather than rigid rules that quickly become outdated.
3. **Set the tone from the top**, ensuring leadership models ethical use of technology.
4. **Encourage ethical innovation**, where efficiency and integrity evolve together rather than compete.
5. **Engage stakeholders** — leadership and staff alike — in ongoing dialogue about ethical expectations as technology changes.

Ethics cannot be static in a dynamic environment.

Q2.   Ethical Training and Professional Integrity in Project Management. How important is formal ethical training and continuous education in ethics for project management professionals? In your view, what role does this training play in maintaining the integrity of professional certifications such as the PMP and in preventing ethical breaches?

Ming: Ethical training is not optional in project management — it is foundational. The complexity, ambiguity, and pressure inherent in modern projects make ethical judgment as critical as technical competence.

I tend to look at ethical education through two complementary lenses: **formal professional requirements** and **personal professional responsibility**.

From a formal perspective, professional certifications such as the PMP set clear expectations. Organizations like Project Management Institute require ongoing continuing education to maintain credentials. These requirements are not merely administrative; they exist to reinforce professional standards, accountability, and trust in the designation itself. Without consistent reinforcement, any professional credential risks becoming symbolic rather than meaningful.

However, formal requirements alone are insufficient.

Ethics is not learned once and then applied mechanically. Ethical dilemmas rarely present themselves as clear violations; more often, they appear as gray areas shaped by time pressure, organizational incentives, cultural norms, or technological shortcuts. This is where **continuous and informal ethical learning** becomes equally important.

Project professionals must actively engage in self-directed learning — reading case studies, reviewing industry publications, participating in discussions, and reflecting on real-world scenarios. Ethical maturity develops through exposure, reflection, and dialogue, not compliance checklists.

In terms of preventing ethical breaches, ethical training plays a critical role across four dimensions:

1. Raising awareness - Ethical training increases awareness of what constitutes ethical risk — including subtle behaviours that may seem harmless or efficient but undermine professional integrity. Many breaches occur not through malicious intent, but through normalization of small shortcuts. Awareness interrupts that process.

2. Providing decision-making frameworks - Training equips professionals with structured tools to analyze ethical dilemmas. When individuals lack a framework, decisions default to convenience, authority pressure, or personal justification. Ethical decision-making models offer a disciplined way to evaluate consequences, obligations, and professional standards — especially in complex situations where policies are silent or ambiguous.

3. Building confidence to act - One of the most overlooked benefits of ethical education is confidence. Professionals who understand ethical standards and decision frameworks are more likely to raise concerns, challenge questionable practices, and seek guidance. Without this confidence, even well-intentioned individuals remain silent — which is often how ethical failures escalate.

4. Reinforcing organizational culture - At the organizational level, ethical training reinforces a culture where integrity is expected, discussed, and supported. It signals that ethics is not a personal risk but a shared responsibility. When organizations combine training with safe escalation paths and leadership support, ethical behaviour becomes sustainable rather than situational.

Ultimately, ethical training protects both the profession and the individual. Certifications retain their credibility only when those who hold them consistently demonstrate ethical judgment in practice. In that sense, ethics is not an abstract ideal — it is a professional competency that must be continuously developed.

Q3.   Ethics and the Role of the Chief Project Officer (CPO) - As a Chief Project Officer, how can you ensure that ethical practices are embedded in the project management processes of your organization? What strategies would you recommend for CPOs when ethical dilemmas arise during complex projects?

Ming: First, I would like to acknowledge the importance of the work you and your collaborators have done in advocating for the Chief Project Officer role. At this stage of organizational complexity, project, program, and portfolio management can no longer remain purely operational functions. Having a CPO at the executive table allows project leadership to actively participate in strategic decision-making rather than simply executing downstream decisions.

The CPO role presents a unique opportunity to embed ethics structurally, not reactively.

If I were operating in a Chief Project Officer capacity, my first priority would be to work in close partnership with compliance leadership — whether that is a Chief Compliance Officer, Legal, or Risk function. Ethical project delivery cannot exist in isolation; it must align with organizational governance, regulatory obligations, and professional standards.

From a practical standpoint, I see four key responsibilities for a CPO in embedding ethics into project management processes:

1. Setting clear expectations. The CPO must establish and communicate explicit ethical standards that apply across all projects and programs which includes developing or reinforcing a comprehensive code of ethics that integrates both organizational values and professional standards. These expectations must be clearly articulated so that project managers, team members, vendors, and stakeholders understand what ethical behaviour looks like in daily decision-making, not just in policy documents.

2. Leading by example. As a member of the executive leadership team, the CPO sets the tone from the top. Ethical behaviour must be demonstrated consistently through actions and decisions, especially under pressure. When leaders act with integrity (even when it is inconvenient) it sends a powerful message to the organization. Ethical leadership was never about perfection; it is about consistency, accountability, and transparency.

3. Embedding ethics through training and frameworks. Ethical awareness cannot be assumed. The CPO should ensure that regular ethical training is built into project management capability development. This includes providing access to structured decision-making tools, such as ethical decision-making frameworks, case studies, and scenario-based discussions. These tools help project professionals navigate gray areas where rules alone are insufficient.

Where organizational frameworks are immature or unclear, adopting established professional resources such as PMI's ethical decision-making guidance provides a credible and practical foundation.

4. Encouraging open dialogue and safe escalation. Finally, the CPO must foster an environment where ethical concerns can be raised without fear of retaliation. Ethical issues often surface early, quietly, and informally. If team members do not feel psychologically safe to speak

up, those issues escalate into serious risks later. Encouraging open dialogue, formal escalation paths, and constructive discussion builds trust, transparency, and resilience across the organization.

In complex projects, ethical dilemmas are inevitable. What matters is not the absence of dilemmas, but the presence of leadership structures capable of addressing them responsibly.

Q4.   How the Quadruple Bottom Line reframes ethical risk in organizations . In your article, you use the Quadruple Bottom Line framework — people, purpose, profit, and planet — to analyze workplace misconduct. Beyond employee theft specifically, how does this framework help leaders and project professionals better understand and manage ethical risk in modern organizations?

Ming: The Quadruple Bottom Line provides a much broader and more accurate lens for understanding ethical risk than traditional compliance or financial frameworks.

When organizations focus only on profit or loss, ethical issues tend to be treated as isolated incidents — something to correct, discipline, or absorb financially. The Quadruple Bottom Line reframes ethical risk as **systemic**, showing how misconduct reflects deeper issues across culture, leadership, and organizational design.

From the **purpose** perspective, ethical risk emerges when there is a disconnect between stated values and everyday behaviour. When purpose is unclear or purely performative, unethical actions — whether theft, data misuse, or procedural shortcuts — become easier to rationalize. Purpose acts as a compass; without it, ethical boundaries blur.

The **people** dimension highlights the human impact of ethical failure. Misconduct erodes trust, damages morale, and destabilizes working relationships. Even when only a few individuals are involved, the consequences ripple across teams, affecting engagement, collaboration, and psychological safety.

From a **profit** standpoint, ethical risk is not just about financial loss. It includes hidden costs — increased controls, reduced productivity, reputational damage, and long-term erosion of stakeholder confidence. Ethical profit emphasizes transparency and fairness, recognizing that sustainable profitability depends on trust.

Finally, the **planet** dimension reminds us that unethical behaviour often leads to waste, inefficiency, and resource misuse. Ethical risk therefore extends beyond the organization itself, affecting sustainability efforts and environmental responsibility.

For leaders and project professionals, the Quadruple Bottom Line shifts ethics from a reactive compliance exercise to a **strategic leadership capability**. It helps organizations detect ethical risk earlier, address root causes rather than symptoms, and build systems where integrity supports — rather than competes with — performance.

Q5.   What mechanisms should be in place to detect and deter collusion?

Ming: Collusion is rarely the result of a single failure. It typically emerges from a combination of weak controls, misaligned incentives, and an organizational culture that tolerates ambiguity. As such, detecting and deterring collusion requires a **systemic, multi-layered approach**, rather than reliance on any single mechanism.

I would frame the necessary mechanisms across **five complementary dimensions**.

First, structural and procedural safeguards must be in place. Organizations should implement clear segregation of duties, approval hierarchies, and role clarity. When individuals hold excessive discretionary power without oversight, the conditions for collusion increase. Rotational assignments, mandatory vacations for sensitive roles, and cross-functional reviews help disrupt patterns that collusive behaviour depends on.

Second, transparency and auditability are essential. Regular internal audits, independent reviews, and data-driven monitoring should be embedded into normal operations, not activated only after suspicion arises. Transparent documentation, traceable decision paths, and consistent record-keeping reduce the opacity that collusion requires to persist. Importantly, audits should be perceived as standard governance practices rather than punitive measures.

Third, ethical culture and tone from leadership play a decisive role.   Collusion thrives in environments where ethical expectations are implicit, negotiable, or inconsistently enforced. Leadership must clearly articulate ethical standards, model them in practice, and reinforce the message that integrity outweighs short-term gains. When leaders demonstrate ethical consistency, it becomes significantly harder for collusive behaviour to rationalize itself as "normal" or "necessary."

Fourth, education and awareness must be continuous.   Employees should be trained not only on what constitutes collusion, but also on how it typically manifests — often subtly and incrementally. Ethical training should include real-world scenarios, conflict-of-interest discussions, and decision-making frameworks that help individuals recognize early warning signs before patterns solidify.

Finally, safe reporting and escalation mechanisms are critical.   Organizations must provide confidential, non-retaliatory channels for raising concerns. Collusion is often visible to peers before it is detectable through systems. If employees fear retaliation or dismissal, silence becomes the default. Psychological safety, clear escalation paths, and visible follow-through are therefore indispensable deterrents.

In summary, collusion cannot be addressed effectively through surveillance or punishment alone. It is best deterred through **strong governance structures, transparent processes, ethical leadership, informed employees, and trusted reporting mechanisms**. When these elements work together, collusion becomes not only harder to execute, but harder to justify — which is ultimately the strongest form of deterrence.

Q6.   How do we empower team members to report unethical behavior safely?

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Ming: Empowering team members to report unethical behaviour safely is fundamentally about **trust in the system**, not the presence of a reporting mechanism. In most organizations, people are already aware when something is wrong. What determines whether they speak up is their assessment of risk — personal, professional, and psychological.

A safe reporting environment begins with **leadership behaviour**, not policy language. When leaders respond to concerns with consistency, discretion, and fairness, they establish credibility. Conversely, even a single instance of retaliation, dismissal, or quiet sidelining of a whistleblower can undermine years of formal ethics work. Employees observe these responses closely and adjust their behaviour accordingly.

Clarity and accessibility of reporting pathways are equally critical. Team members need to know where to go, how to raise a concern, and what will happen next. Multiple avenues should exist, recognizing that individuals vary in comfort when reporting to direct managers, compliance functions, or independent channels. Confidentiality must be real and operational, not merely promised. If anonymity is offered, it must be protected both technically and procedurally.

Empowerment also depends on **ethical literacy**. Many employees hesitate because they are uncertain whether an issue qualifies as unethical or whether raising it would be perceived as overreacting. Regular ethical education — grounded in real scenarios rather than abstract principles — equips individuals with the language and judgment needed to articulate concerns objectively and professionally.

Equally important is how organizations handle what happens after a concern is raised. Silence erodes confidence. While confidentiality limits disclosure, visible follow-through matters. Communicating that concerns are reviewed, investigated, and resolved — even at a high level — reinforces the belief that reporting leads to action rather than inconvenience.

Ultimately, safe reporting emerges when people believe that integrity is protected, not penalized. When ethical concerns are treated as contributions to organizational health rather than disruptions, reporting becomes a normal aspect of professional responsibility. In such environments, speaking up is no longer an act of courage — it is simply part of how the organization functions.

Q7.   The Future of Ethics in Project Management - Looking ahead, how do you envision the evolution of ethical standards in project management over the next five to ten years, particularly in light of rapid technological advancement and changing organizational dynamics?

Ming: This question invites us to think not only about where project management is today, but how we as practitioners contribute to shaping its future. Much like your work with the PMO community and the Chief Project Officer initiative, advancing ethics requires deliberate, collective effort.

Over the next five to ten years, I see the evolution of ethics in project management being shaped by several major forces.

1. Integration of artificial intelligence. The increasing use of AI in project management will fundamentally change how decisions are made. Ethical standards will need to address how AI-generated inputs, recommendations, and automation are used as well as where human judgment must remain central. Ethics will play a critical role in ensuring AI enhances decision-making rather than obscuring accountability.

2. Data privacy and information responsibility. As projects rely more heavily on data, ethical standards must place greater emphasis on data privacy, security, and lifecycle management. This includes responsible data collection, secure storage, appropriate usage, retention policies, and eventual data destruction when information is no longer needed. Ethical project management will increasingly intersect with data governance.

3. Sustainability and social responsibility. Ethics will expand beyond individual behaviour and compliance into broader questions of impact. Project leaders will be expected to consider environmental sustainability, social responsibility, and long-term consequences, not just mentioning cost, scope, and schedule. Ethical success will increasingly be measured by outcomes, not outputs.

4. Transparency and stakeholder trust. Digital transformation and global collaboration are increasing visibility into how projects are run. Ethical standards will evolve to support greater transparency in decision-making, reporting, and stakeholder communication. Trust will become a strategic asset with ethical behaviour as its foundation.

5. Continuous ethical learning. Finally, ethics will require continuous learning. As technology, organizations, and societal expectations evolve, so must ethical understanding. Ongoing education, reflection, and professional dialogue will be essential for project practitioners to remain effective and credible.

In summary, ethics will no longer be a peripheral topic in project management. It will become a defining capability; one that distinguishes mature, trusted professionals and organizations in an increasingly complex world.

Closing

As project management continues to evolve toward executive influence through roles such as the Chief Project Officer, the profession faces a quiet but consequential test. Structures can be redesigned, technologies adopted, and decision speed accelerated — but without ethical clarity, these advancements merely amplify risk rather than capability.

What emerges clearly from this discussion is that ethics is not a matter of compliance checklists or isolated incidents. It is expressed through how decisions are framed, how power is exercised, how shortcuts are judged, and how responsibility is distributed when outcomes are uncertain. For CPOs and senior project leaders, ethics becomes inseparable from governance, culture, and long-term credibility.

This special edition exists precisely because ethics cannot be retrofitted after the fact — whether in organizations or in professional discourse. While it did not make its way into the original

publication, it belongs squarely within the same strategic conversation. In many ways, it underpins every theme explored in the book: history, complexity, AI, leadership evolution, and the future of the profession.

As organizations continue to navigate technological acceleration, distributed authority, and heightened stakeholder scrutiny, ethical maturity will increasingly distinguish resilient systems from fragile ones. The question is no longer whether ethics matters, but whether it is **designed into leadership roles with the same rigor as strategy, delivery, and performance**.

This conversation is an invitation — not to moralize, but to think more precisely. Ethics, when treated as a professional competency and a leadership discipline, becomes one of the most powerful stabilizing forces in complex systems.

That, ultimately, is the role ethics must play in the future of project leadership.

You can review a recording of this interview using the following QR code:

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About the Interviewer

Aina Aliieva (Alive)

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Aina Aliieva (Alive) is an experienced Agile Coach and a Business Consultant with 20 years of experience in different industries, from hospitality and tourism to banking and engineering, a Founder & CEO at Bee Agile - a boutique company with a mission of bridging Humans & Machines.

She is a keynote speaker on Agile, Project Management, Cybersecurity, Negotiation, People Management, and Soft Skills topics. She was a guest instructor at NASA in 2022 & 2023 with topics on Conflict Resolution & Negotiation and Facilitation Techniques.

Her book, "It Starts with YOU. 40 Letters to My Younger Self on How to Get Going in Your Career," hit the #1 position in the #jobhunting category on Amazon and is featured in a Forbes Councils Executive Library.

She also contributed to the books "Mastering Solution Delivery: Practical Insights and Lessons from Thought Leaders in a Post-Pandemic Era", "Green PMO: Sustainability through Project Management Lens", "Agile Coaching and Transformation: The Journey to Enterprise Agility". She is a lead author of an amazon bestseller "Evolution of the PMO: Rise of the Chief Project Officer"

Aina was also a Finalist in the Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year category in 2021 by the Canadian SME National Business Award

She can be contacted at https://www.linkedin.com/in/aina-aliieva/