

## ***Reimagining Project Management for a New Era***

# **From Operations-Led to Project-Led Leadership<sup>1</sup>**

**Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez<sup>2</sup>**

For more than a century, leadership was optimized for stability.

Executives were trained to run machines. To reduce variance. To protect margins. To scale what already worked. The dominant mental model was operational excellence: efficiency, predictability, control.

And it worked.

Factories scaled. Supply chains globalized. Quarterly performance became a science. The best leaders were those who could keep the engine humming.

But here's the uncomfortable truth: that engine is no longer the main source of value.

In today's environment, value is created less by running operations and more by changing them. Digital transformation. AI integration. Sustainability transitions. M&A. New business models. All of it happens through projects.

Yet most executives are still wired—and rewarded—to lead operations, not portfolios of change.

That mismatch is becoming dangerous.

### ***The Stability Trap***

Operations-led leadership is built on three pillars: optimization, hierarchy, and risk minimization.

- Optimize what exists.
- Decide at the top.

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- Avoid surprises.

But projects don't behave like operations.

Projects are temporary. Cross-functional. Uncertain. Political. They challenge the status quo. They compete for scarce resources. They demand trade-offs.

When leaders apply operational logic to project environments, predictable things happen:

- Too many initiatives are launched.
- Priorities remain unclear.
- Decision rights are ambiguous.
- Resources are spread thin.
- Execution slows down.

I see this everywhere. The CEO announces five strategic priorities. The executive committee adds ten more. Functions protect their budgets. Nobody wants to stop anything.

The result? A bloated portfolio and exhausted teams.

Operations-led leaders optimize the present.

Project-led leaders design the future.

You cannot do both with the same mindset.

### ***Why Leadership Models Are Breaking***

Most executive development programs still focus on P&L management, cost control, compliance, and operational metrics. All critical. All necessary.

But insufficient.

In a project-driven world, the scarcest resource is not capital. It is attention.

Leadership today is less about managing assets and more about allocating focus. Which projects matter? Which do not? What will we stop so that something else can win?

This is where traditional models fail.

Operations reward continuity.

Projects require discontinuity.

Operations seek variance reduction.

Projects require experimentation.

Operations measure efficiency.

Projects measure impact.

When these logics collide, operations usually win. Why? Because they feel safer. Because they are measurable. Because they are familiar.

And so transformation stalls—not due to lack of ambition, but due to gravitational pull.

### ***The Executive as Chief Prioritization Officer***

In a project-led organization, the executive role shifts dramatically.

You are no longer primarily a guardian of stability. You become the architect of focus.

That means three things.

#### ***1. Ruthless Prioritization***

If everything is strategic, nothing is.

Project-led leadership starts with a clear, ranked portfolio. Not a list. A hierarchy.

What are the top three enterprise initiatives that will define the next 24 months? Who sponsors them? What gets deprioritized because of them?

This sounds simple. It is politically explosive.

Because prioritization is power.

It means telling respected colleagues that their initiative will wait. It means killing pet projects. It means reallocating top talent.

But without this discipline, the organization fragments into a thousand local optimizations.

#### ***2. Active Sponsorship***

In operations-led models, executives review performance. In project-led models, they remove obstacles.

Sponsorship does not include attending the quarterly steering committee.

It is:

- Clarifying decision rights.
- Securing cross-functional alignment.

- Intervening when politics block progress.
- Protecting teams from priority shifts.

When sponsors are passive, projects drift. When sponsors are active, momentum builds.

I often ask executives a simple question: “What roadblock did you remove this week for your top strategic project?”

Silence is common.

That silence is the implementation gap.

### ***3. Strategic Stopping***

One of the most underdeveloped leadership muscles is the ability to stop.

Operations reward continuity. Projects require endings.

Markets change. Assumptions fail. Technologies evolve. Yet many organizations continue funding initiatives long after their logic has expired.

Why? Because stopping feels like admitting failure.

But in reality, stopping is strategic courage.

Project-led leaders normalize intelligent exits. They treat sunk costs as tuition, not as shackles.

The ability to stop creates the capacity to start what truly matters.

### ***From Functional Power to Portfolio Power***

In operations-led environments, power sits in functions: budgets, headcount, expertise.

In project-led environments, power shifts to portfolios.

The key governance question becomes: how do we dynamically allocate our best people to our most critical initiatives?

This requires a structural shift.

Instead of asking, “*How is my function performing?*” executives must ask, “*Is our strategic portfolio delivering value?*”

That subtle shift changes conversations dramatically.

HR is no longer just managing workforce plans. It is enabling talent mobility across projects.

Finance is no longer only controlling cost centers. It is dynamically reallocating capital across initiatives.

The PMO is no longer a reporting body. It becomes the integrator of strategy and execution.

This is not cosmetic. It is systemic.

### ***The Leadership Identity Crisis***

There is also a psychological dimension.

Many senior leaders built their careers mastering operational complexity. They rose by stabilizing businesses, not by disrupting them.

Project-led leadership requires a different identity:

- Comfort with ambiguity.
- Willingness to reallocate power.
- Tolerance for visible experimentation.
- Acceptance of short-term volatility for long-term gain.

This is uncomfortable.

It means moving from being the “steady hand” to being the “change catalyst.”

It means spending less time reviewing dashboards and more time shaping direction.

It means being evaluated not just on quarterly performance, but on transformation trajectory.

Some leaders thrive in this shift.

Others resist it quietly.

### ***AI Is Accelerating the Shift***

Artificial Intelligence is now automating many operational tasks, including forecasting, scheduling, reporting, and analytics.

Ironically, this makes operations easier to manage.

Which increases the temptation to double down on them.

But AI also increases the speed of change. Business models are being redefined in months, not years. Competitive advantage erodes faster.

The paradox is clear:

The more efficient operations become, the more critical project leadership becomes.

Because the advantage will not come from running the machine slightly better.

It will come from reinventing the machine altogether.

### ***A Simple Test***

If you want to know whether you are still operating under an operations-led model, ask yourself:

- Can you clearly articulate your top three strategic projects?
- Do they have empowered sponsors?
- Are your best people working on them full-time?
- Have you stopped lower-priority initiatives to free capacity?
- Is your executive agenda dominated by forward-looking transformation—or backward-looking performance reviews?

If most of your time is spent reviewing what happened rather than shaping what will happen, you are still operations-led.

And that is increasingly risky.

### ***Final Reflection: Leadership for the Project Economy***

We are not witnessing a temporary phase of heightened change.

We are living in a permanent project economy.

Operations will always matter. They fund the future. They provide stability. They build credibility.

But they no longer define leadership.

The defining question for modern executives is no longer: “*How efficiently are we running the business?*”

It is: “*How deliberately are we changing it?*”

From operations-led to project-led leadership is not a structural tweak. It is a philosophical shift.

It requires courage to prioritize.  
Discipline to stop.  
Humility to sponsor.  
And vision to design portfolios that shape the future.

In the end, leadership is not about maintaining what is.

It is about building what must become.

See you in April.

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*Disclaimer: ChatGPT was used to support editing and formatting. All substantive content is the author's original work.*

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## About the Author



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**Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez**, PMI Fellow, is one of the **world's leading experts in Project Management and Strategy Implementation**. He is the author of the "[Harvard Business Review Project Management Handbook](#)" (HBR 2021) and is the **most published author on project management matters in Harvard Business Review**. His upcoming book, [Powered by Projects: Leading Your Organization in the Transformation Age](#), will be published by Harvard Business Review Press in early 2026.

Antonio has brought Project Management to the center of executive leadership, positioning it as a critical capability for transformation in the next decade. He is the creator of influential concepts such as the **Project Economy®**, the **Hierarchy of Purpose®**, and the **Project-Driven Organization™**, which argue that *projects have*

*become the operating system of modern organizations—and the language of future careers.*

His global impact on management and leadership has been recognized by [Thinkers50](#), where he is **the only project management thinker included twice in a row** in the ranking of the world's most influential management thinkers. He is also the recipient of the prestigious **Thinkers50 Ideas Into Practice Award** and a member of the **Marshall Goldsmith 100 Coaches** community.

He was the global Chairman of the Project Management Institute in 2016 and has been recognized as a Fellow of PMI for his contribution to the project management profession. He led the creation of the Brightline Initiative, founded [Projects & Co](#), and co-founded the [Strategy Implementation Institute](#).

His work focuses on advising senior leaders on prioritizing and implementing strategic initiatives and leading transformational change.

Antonio is also the author of "[Lead Successful Projects](#)" (Penguin, 2019), "[The Project Revolution](#)" (LID, 2019), and "[The Focused Organization](#)" (Taylor & Francis, 2014), and has contributed to seven other books. A pioneer and leading authority in teaching and coaching senior executives the art and science of strategy execution and project management. Currently visiting professor at Duke CE, Instituto de Empresa, Solvay, Vlerick, Ecole des Ponts, and Skolkovo.

He is a much-in-demand speaker at events worldwide. Antonio has presented at more than 800 conferences around the world and is regularly ranked the best speaker. European Business Summit, Strategy Leaders Forum, Gartner Summit, TEDx, and EU Cohesion Policy Conference; are some of the events he has delivered inspirational keynotes.

He is former Sustainability Program Director and Head of Global Program Management Office at GlaxoSmithKline Vaccines. Previously he also served as Head of Project Portfolio Management at BNP Paribas Fortis and Head of Post-Merger Integration at Fortis Bank, leading the acquisition of ABN AMRO, the largest in financial service history. He also worked for ten years at PricewaterhouseCoopers, becoming the global lead practitioner for project and change management.

Born in Madrid, Spain, and educated in Germany, Mexico, Italy, and the United States, Antonio is fluent in five languages. He is an Economist, has an MBA from London Business School and Insead's IDP. You can follow Antonio through his [LinkedIn Newsletter - Lead Projects Successfully](#). For more information, visit his website at [www.antonionietorodriguez.com](http://www.antonionietorodriguez.com). He can be reached via email: [antonio.nieto.rodriguez@gmail.com](mailto:antonio.nieto.rodriguez@gmail.com)