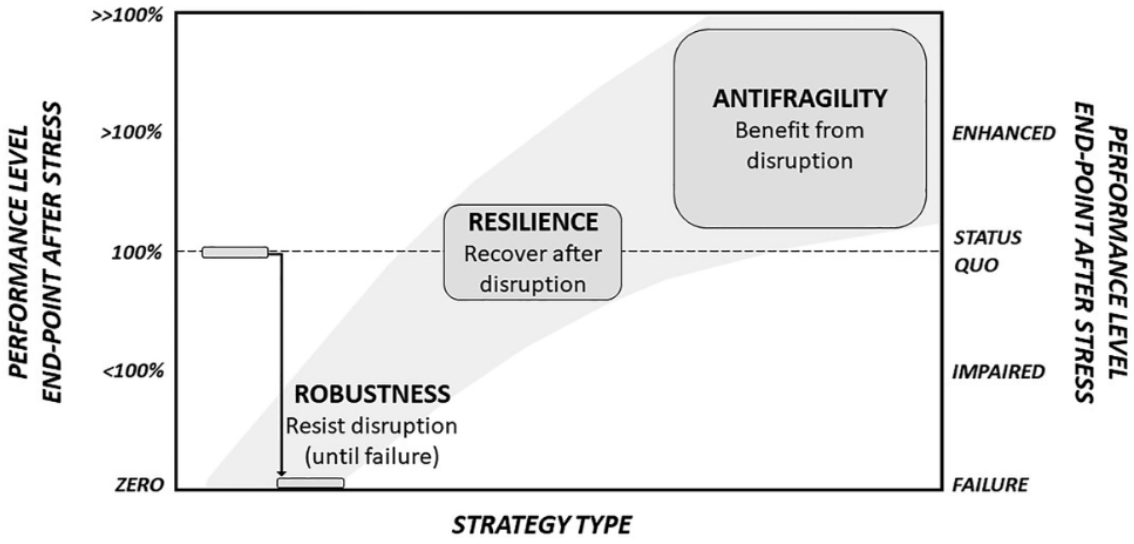
On David Hillson's paper "Beyond resilience: towards antifragility"[1]

Thomas Walenta



Source(s): Adapted from Hillson (2022), figure created by author

Abstract

This review builds on Hillson's discussion of antifragility by extending it with selected ideas from Taleb, including the Hydra metaphor, Seneca's asymmetry, the barbell strategy, and via negativa. It examines how antifragility applies to project and program management, and suggests that programs may be particularly well suited to adaptive, benefit-driven outcomes. The paper also connects these ideas to Bendell's feedback-loop perspective and Daoist philosophy, emphasizing contextual adaptation over rigid planning. It highlights areas for further research, including long-term strategies, centenarian organizations, and decision-making under uncertainty, and concludes that antifragility is not only about resilience but also a principle for learning, adaptation, and value creation. Overall, the paper argues that antifragility is not only about resilience, but also a principle for learning, adaptation, and value creation

[1] How to cite this work: Walenta, T. (2026). On David Hillson's paper "Beyond resilience: towards antifragility", paper review, *PM World Journal,* Vol. XV, Issue V, May.

Keywords: *Antifragility, Robustness, Resilience, Sustainability, Program vs. Project Management, Chinese and Western culture*

Introduction

This article builds on David Hillson's 2023 opinion piece, "Beyond resilience: towards antifragility?" (Hillson, 2023) and broadens the discussion of antifragility for project and program management. Hillson's paper and the accompanying webinar provide a practical entry point into a concept introduced by Nassim Nicholas Taleb in *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder (Taleb, 2012)*, which has since attracted growing interest across management and organizational studies.

The present review extends that discussion by drawing on several of Taleb's core ideas, including the Hydra metaphor, Seneca's asymmetry, the barbell strategy, optionality, and via negativa. It also considers Hillson's notion of rheopecticity as a useful way to describe structural improvement under certain kinds of disturbance. On that basis, the paper examines how antifragility may be understood not only as a property of systems but also as a managerial principle for learning, adaptation, and value creation.

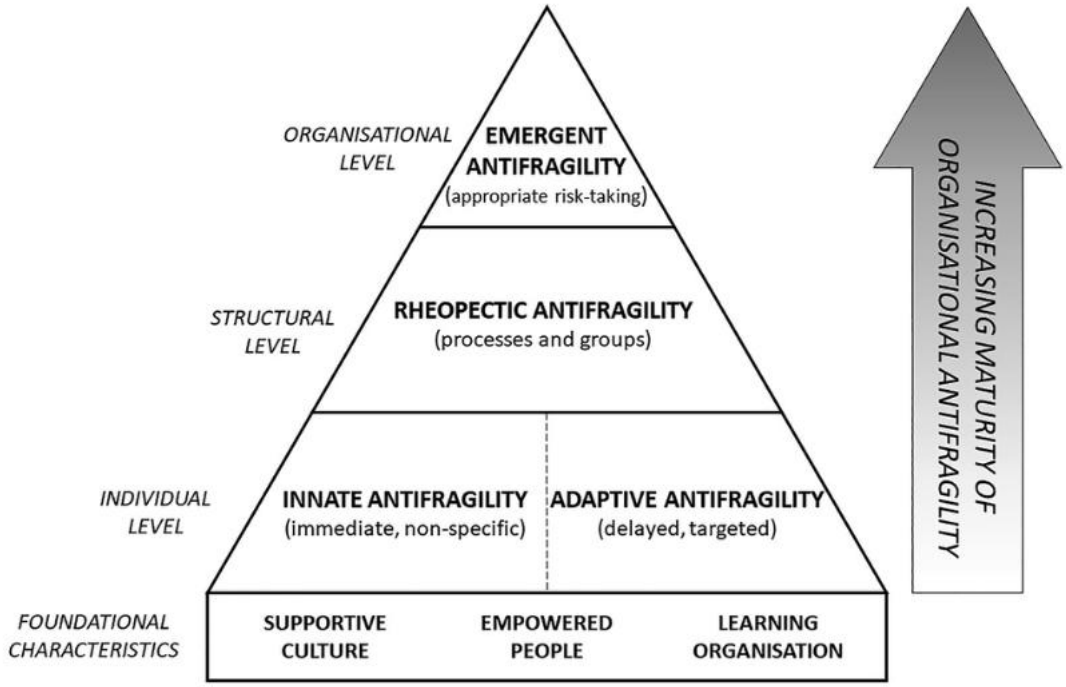
A further aim of the article is to explore whether antifragility is more naturally aligned with programs than with projects. While projects are typically defined by fixed scope, deadlines, and preplanned deliverables, programs are oriented toward benefits realization and longer-term value creation, which may make them more receptive to adaptation in the face of uncertainty. For that reason, the paper also connects antifragility to Bendell's feedback-loop perspective, Daoist thought, and selected questions for future empirical research.

David Hillson's paper

David Hillson, a PMI Fellow whom I have known for more than a quarter of a century, revisited Taleb's ideas to make antifragility more practical for organizations, projects, and programs. His central point is that antifragility goes beyond robustness and resilience: while robustness helps systems absorb disturbance and resilience helps them recover, antifragility allows performance to improve under certain kinds of stress.

Hillson's notion of rheopectic antifragility is especially useful as a management metaphor. It suggests that some structures can become stronger or more capable through disturbance, much as rheopectic materials become more viscous under sustained stress. In practical terms, he links this to process improvement, where disruption need not merely be controlled but can also stimulate refinement and learning.

At the organizational level, Hillson connects antifragility with good risk management in a healthy, growing organization. This is an important contribution because it shifts antifragility away from an abstract philosophical idea and toward a managerial framing that practitioners can use. His model is not fully MECE, but it does make antifragility more accessible and operationally relevant.



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Hillson also clarifies an important distinction among robustness, resilience, and antifragility. Robustness helps preserve performance under stress, resilience helps a system return to a prior state, and antifragility implies that performance can improve because of disruption. That distinction matters because it suggests that organizations should not only aim to survive shocks, but also to learn from them and use them productively.

Taleb's original work

Taleb's core argument is that some systems do not merely withstand shocks; they actually improve because of them. In his framework, fragile systems break under stress, robust systems resist stress, resilient systems recover from it, and antifragile systems become stronger through exposure to volatility, uncertainty, and disorder.

A central implication of this view is that uncertainty should not always be treated as a problem to eliminate. Instead, systems should be designed to benefit from unpredictability rather than simply endure it. This shifts the managerial task from control and prediction toward learning, adaptation, and selective exposure to variability.

Taleb proposes several practical ways to build antifragility. The barbell strategy suggests combining extreme safety with small, high-upside bets; via negativa emphasizes improvement by removing harmful elements; skin in the game links decision-making to consequences; and optionality keeps choices open so that uncertainty becomes an asset rather than a threat.

He also uses a series of metaphors to make the idea more concrete. The Hydra shows how damage can produce growth rather than loss, and Seneca's asymmetry captures the idea of reducing downside while preserving upside. Taleb's broader message is that antifragility is not passive survival, but a deliberate way of organizing choices so that disorder becomes a source of strength.

Further research opportunities

Bendell's observation that quality management can both support antifragility and introduce new fragilities suggests a useful research question: when does the creation of structure help a system adapt, and when does it begin to constrain it? This tension deserves closer conceptual and empirical examination, especially in project-based environments where learning mechanisms and control mechanisms often coexist. (Bendell, 2017)

A second research stream concerns the distinction between projects and programs. Although the two are often discussed together, they differ in purpose, time horizon, and logic of value creation. Future studies could examine whether programs are indeed more naturally aligned with antifragility because they are benefit-oriented, adaptive, and potentially open-ended, while projects remain more tightly bound to predefined scope and deadlines.

A third avenue is the cross-cultural dimension of antifragility. Hillson's question of what "better" means inside organizations points to different value logics in Western and Eastern contexts, and Daoist thought offers a particularly interesting lens because it emphasizes contextual judgment rather than rigid planning. Research could explore how these cultural perspectives shape the interpretation and practice of antifragility in organizations.

Empirical studies of long-lived organizations would also be valuable. Centenarian firms such as Panasonic, IBM, Exxon, and Ford may offer examples of how long-horizon thinking, adaptive governance, and strategic continuity support resilience or antifragility over time. Panasonic's 250-year plan is especially interesting because it raises questions about how long-term vision, organizational philosophy, and adaptability interact in practice. (Sayyadi & Provitera, 2025).

Finally, the human dimension of antifragility deserves more attention. The wisdom competencies described in psychiatric and therapeutic literature suggest that decision-making capacity, perspective-taking, and tolerance of uncertainty may support antifragile behavior at the individual level. Further work could connect these competencies to optionality, mindset, and temporal ambidexterity in complex managerial settings. (Walenta, 2025).

Conclusion

Hillson's framing of antifragility provides a clear and accessible starting point for project and program practitioners, while Taleb's wider toolkit suggests more advanced ways to design for learning and gain in uncertain conditions. Bendell's feedback-loop approach emphasizes both the importance of structure and the potential for structure itself to create fragility, highlighting the need for balance rather than control for its own sake. The discussion of Daoist thought offers a complementary perspective by illustrating how contextual judgment and adaptive progress can be more suitable than rigid planning in uncertain environments. Overall, these viewpoints suggest that antifragility is especially important for programs, where benefit realization, adaptation, and long-term value are key. Future research should explore how organizations with long-term goals, such as Panasonic, put these ideas into practice and how individual skills can support antifragile behaviors in complex settings.

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About the Author

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Thomas Walenta brings more than 50 years of experience in projects, including over three decades in leadership and two decades in program management. He delivered his first project in 1974 and went on to spend much of his career at IBM, where from the mid-1990s he built PMOs, led complex programs, and successfully turned around troubled initiatives. His work included major SAP rollouts, outsourcing contracts, and portfolio integration across industries and regions. More recently, he supported a German manufacturer in introducing enterprise-wide portfolio management and a hybrid PMO. Over the years, his assignments have taken him through government,

banking, insurance, electronics, and automotive sectors, and his professional journey has spanned Europe, Russia, the U.S., Japan, India, and nearly 100 countries worldwide.

Since 1998, Thomas has been an active volunteer with the Project Management Institute (PMI). He served as President of the PMI Frankfurt Chapter, completed two terms on PMI's global Board of Directors, and spent five years on PMI's Ethics Review Committee. In 2012, he received the PMI Fellow Award, awarded to fewer than 100 individuals worldwide. He has held the PMP since 1998 and the PgMP since 2014. He continues to volunteer for global PMI groups and works as an event manager for the local Chapter.

Thomas has led his own consulting business since 2001, taught project management at two universities for over 20 years and spoken at more than 100 international conferences. He has published extensively on project and program management, earned a diploma as a non-executive director from the UK's Institute of Directors in 2017, and has been pursuing a DBA at SBS in Zurich since 2023. He also mentors around 15 professionals, apprentices, and refugees. Thomas lives in Hackenheim, near Frankfurt, Germany, and can be reached at thwalenta@online.de.