Regenerative Project Management: Rethinking the Purpose and Practice of Projects [1, 2]

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Abstract

Traditional project management frameworks prioritise delivery against predefined constraints of scope, schedule, and cost. While effective for execution, this paradigm externalises environmental and social impacts and locks in unsustainable outcomes early in the project lifecycle, where between 70 and 90 percent of lifecycle impact is determined (Bragança et al., 2014; Buyle et al., 2013). This paper introduces Regenerative Project Management (RPM) as a reorientation of project practice from delivery-focused execution to systems-based stewardship. Drawing on biomimicry, circular economy principles, and adaptive governance, RPM reframes projects as interventions within interconnected ecological and organisational systems. The framework extends the conventional lifecycle with Phase 0 (Regenerative Opportunity Assessment) before initiation and Phase 6 (Regenerative Completion and Return) beyond closure, and embeds four Regenerative Decision Gates (Regenerative Potential, Circular Design, Waste Minimisation, and Ecosystem Health) that evaluate regenerative trajectory in parallel with traditional performance metrics. Through conceptual development, four practitioner tools, and a 1.2 billion dollar, 500-plus-organisation case from the 2020 Oklahoma COVID-19 response, the paper demonstrates how early-stage decisions determine the majority of lifecycle impacts, positioning project managers as critical agents of long-term value creation rather than short-term delivery. Embedding regenerative principles into project governance can shift organisations from extractive, linear models toward adaptive, resilient systems aligned with broader ecological and societal outcomes.

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1. Introduction: The Purpose Problem

A project manager in 2026 faces a strange inheritance. The tools have never been more sophisticated. The certifications have never been more standardised. The body of knowledge has never been more comprehensive. And yet the outcomes the profession is being asked to deliver increasingly exceed what the profession was built to do. The Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive, the Circular Economy Action Plan, the Sustainable Development Goals, and a rising tide of net-zero commitments all land, at the level of actual delivery, on the desks of project managers working within a lifecycle designed for a different world.

Conventional project management asks a narrow question. Did the project deliver what it was chartered to deliver, on time, within budget, to specification, with stakeholders signed off? That question served a world in which the project's downstream effects were invisible to the project's accounting. It does not serve the world we actually work in now (Silvius & Schipper, 2019; Martens & Carvalho, 2017).

The purpose problem is not that project managers are failing at their jobs. It is that the job itself has been defined too narrowly for the outcomes society now expects projects to produce. A project that delivers its scope on time and within budget can still generate stranded assets, locked-in emissions, materials that cannot be recovered, and community impacts that metastasize long after the project closure ceremony. These are not side effects. They are structural consequences of a lifecycle that concentrates governance attention on execution and leaves the highest-leverage decisions, what the project is, whether it should exist, what it will leave behind, largely outside the project manager's formal remit (Geraldi & Söderlund, 2018).

Research in sustainable design has established that between 70 and 90 percent of a project's lifecycle environmental impact is determined during early concept and scoping decisions, before formal project initiation activates conventional governance (Bragança et al., 2014; Buyle et al., 2013). Conventional sustainability assessment, when it happens at all, happens after this window has closed. The result is predictable. Regenerative outcomes become structurally impossible no matter how much effort the execution team invests during delivery. The project is not failing during execution. It failed during conception. Execution is merely where the failure becomes visible.

This paper argues that the solution is not more sustainability vocabulary layered on top of conventional practice. The solution is a different lifecycle. Regenerative Project Management (RPM) extends the scope of the project manager's work upstream, into the phase where projects are conceived, and downstream, into the phase where materials and learning return to the

organisation and its ecosystem. It replaces a linear extract, build, deliver, close model with a cyclical model drawn from how living systems actually sustain themselves (Benyus, 1997; Mang & Reed, 2012). The framework is not borrowed from ecology as a metaphor. It is borrowed as a functional specification.

> *Nature runs on information, feedback, and return. Project management has been running on commitment, escalation, and closure. The gap between those two operating logics is the gap we are trying to close.*

The remainder of this paper proceeds in six sections. Section 2 defines RPM and locates its conceptual foundations. Section 3 presents the seven phases of the RPM lifecycle. Section 4 specifies the four regenerative decision gates that operationalise the framework. Section 5 grounds the argument in a large-scale public-sector case from the Oklahoma COVID-19 response. Section 6 offers four tools practitioners can apply on their next project. Section 7 closes with implications for the profession.

2. Defining Regenerative Project Management

Regenerative Project Management is a governance framework for project-based organisations that integrates biomimicry, circular economy principles, and living-systems design into the full project lifecycle. It extends the lifecycle upstream to Phase 0 (Regenerative Opportunity Assessment) and downstream to Phase 6 (Regenerative Completion and Return). It embeds ecological and social criteria into intake, scope, materials, decision gates, and portfolio governance. It repositions the project manager from a delivery specialist focused on execution to a steward accountable for the full lifecycle, including consequences that extend beyond formal closure.

The framework rests on three foundations.

2.1 Biomimicry as design methodology, not metaphor

Biomimicry is the practice of learning from and emulating the strategies that living systems have refined over 3.8 billion years of evolution (Benyus, 1997). It is already embedded in architecture, product design, and materials science. RPM applies it to project governance. The operative question becomes: how would a mature ecosystem organise the kind of activity we are calling a project? Ecosystems do not separate ideation from execution from closure. They run continuous cycles in which outputs become inputs, feedback is constant, and the system's resilience is a function of the health of every node in the network (Simard, 2021). RPM asks project governance to behave the same way.

Life's Principles, developed through the biomimicry community's translation of evolutionary strategies into design heuristics (Baumeister et al., 2014; Pedersen Zari, 2018), are treated in this

paper as working conditions rather than aspirational values. Six principles map most directly onto project governance: adapt to changing conditions; integrate development with growth; be locally attuned and responsive; use life-friendly chemistry; be resource efficient through circular flows; and evolve to survive. Each translates into specific governance criteria rather than rhetorical positioning.

2.2 Circular economy as the material logic of the project

Circular economy principles specify what the project does with matter (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2015; Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). Where a linear project accepts materials from the upstream economy, transforms them through project work, and releases outputs into a downstream environment treated as a sink, a circular project treats every input as borrowed and every output as destined for another cycle. The distinction is not decorative. It determines what the project specifies, who the project contracts with, and what the project is accountable for at closure.

The implementation gap between circular economy theory and organisational practice is now well documented (Kirchherr et al., 2023). Circular principles that cannot be operationalised in the project's intake criteria, material specifications, decision gates, and closure obligations will remain aspirational. RPM is an attempt to operationalise them at the governance level where project-based organisations make their most consequential material commitments.

2.3 Living-systems design as the governance pattern

Living systems sustain themselves through distributed intelligence, feedback-rich coordination, and redundancy with specialisation (Meadows, 2008; Sterman, 2006). Conventional project governance concentrates authority at the centre, compresses information through reporting layers, and penalises the kind of local adaptation that living systems depend on. RPM builds governance structures that distribute decision authority closer to the edge, shorten feedback loops, and make local adaptation a design feature rather than an exception. Under conditions of radical uncertainty (Kay & King, 2020), where outcomes cannot be reliably predicted, such distributed structures consistently outperform predictive ones (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

Taken together, these three foundations reframe what a project is for. Table 1 summarises the shift.

Table 1. Conventional versus Regenerative Project Management

Conventional PM	Regenerative PM
Deliver outputs	Influence system outcomes
Optimise constraints (scope, schedule, cost)	Optimise long-term system health
Project ends at delivery	Project continues through lifecycle impact

Success measured as efficiency	Success measured as regeneration and resilience
Execution focus	Lifecycle stewardship

3. The Seven-Phase RPM Lifecycle

The conventional project lifecycle is typically rendered as five phases: initiation, planning, execution, monitoring and control, and closing (Project Management Institute, 2021). RPM retains recognisable equivalents of these phases but reconfigures what each phase decides and what criteria govern the gates between them. It also adds two phases that conventional models omit.

Phase 0: Regenerative Opportunity Assessment (pre-intake)

This is the phase that shapes what projects are even imagined. Before a formal business case is drafted, the organisation conducts structured inquiry into whether the right problem is being solved, whose problem it is, what a regenerative response would look like, and what should not be pursued. The phase uses biomimetic problem framing, regenerative opportunity scanning, and anti-portfolio analysis. Its output is a Regenerative Concept Hypothesis and an ecosystem impact assessment, not a project charter. Phase 0 is the single highest-leverage phase in the RPM lifecycle because it determines whether the project is the right project. The question shifts from 'can we deliver this project?' to 'should this project exist in this form, in this place, at this time?'

Phase 1: Circular Intake

Conventional intake evaluates business case feasibility, strategic alignment, and resource availability. Circular intake adds four criteria: circular design potential, end-of-life pathways, material cycling feasibility, and regenerative value creation. A project that cannot demonstrate a credible answer to where its materials will go at end of life does not pass Phase 1. The decision authority is a Regenerative Intake Review Board, and the output is an intake approval with circularity rating, a Regenerative Intent Statement, and validated end-of-life pathways. This sounds radical only because conventional intake has been allowed to defer that question to somebody else for so long.

Phase 2: Lifecycle-Oriented Scope Definition

Scope definition expands from what the project will deliver to what the project will be accountable for across its full material and social lifecycle. The scope document specifies not just the deliverable but the deliverable's first, second, and third use cycles; the stakeholder communities affected at each cycle; and the organisation's accountability for outcomes that emerge after formal

closure. A cross-functional scope team produces a Regenerative Work Breakdown Structure, a systems boundary map, and a lifecycle charter. Lifecycle scope is where most sustainability commitments either get operationalised or quietly abandoned.

Phase 3: Sustainable Materials and Design

Material and method selection is bounded by circularity and biomimicry criteria. Where conventional projects ask what will work, regenerative projects ask what will work and what will return. Gate criteria include life-friendly chemistry, material passports, reuse pathways, and circular design integration. Outputs include material passports, reuse documentation, and disassembly specifications. This phase is the point at which the 70 to 90 percent of lifecycle environmental impact that is locked in by early design decisions (Bragança et al., 2014; Buyle et al., 2013) is either locked into regenerative pathways or locked out of them.

Phase 4: Regenerative Decision Gates

Decision gates are the project's immune system. Conventional gates ask whether the project is on track (Killen et al., 2008). Regenerative gates also ask whether the project is on trajectory, that is, whether execution to date has preserved the regenerative intent established in Phases 0 through 3. The four gates are specified in detail in Section 4. A multi-stakeholder gate review board evaluates regenerative and conventional metrics in parallel, producing gate approvals, revision plans, or escalations to portfolio-level governance.

Phase 5: Portfolio-Level Regenerative Governance

RPM is not only a project-level framework. It requires portfolio-level governance that scores, sequences, and funds projects on regenerative criteria and that treats portfolio learning as a primary output of project completion (Carboni et al., 2018). A portfolio governance board integrating PMO and ESG leadership evaluates portfolio circularity targets, carbon performance, and regenerative investment thresholds. This is where the PMO evolves from a scheduling and compliance function into a regenerative intelligence function.

Phase 6: Regenerative Completion and Return (post-delivery)

Conventional closure ends the project. Regenerative completion returns the project. Materials are transferred to their next use cycle under clear custody arrangements. Ecosystem commitments are validated and, where necessary, funded forward. Insights are coded into the organisation's regenerative intelligence and fed back into Phase 0 opportunity assessment for future projects. A project closure board and sustainability leadership produce a closure audit, restoration reports, and feedback into future projects. The Bullitt Center in Seattle, with governance structures extending stewardship across the building's intended 250-year lifespan, and Seoul's Cheonggyecheon Stream restoration, which generated ecological and social returns only measurable years after

conventional closure, illustrate that Phase 6 is not aspirational. It reflects the actual temporal scope of project consequences that current frameworks structurally exclude.

4. The Four Regenerative Decision Gates

Regenerative decision gates are the mechanism by which RPM prevents regenerative intent from eroding during execution. The gates serve two functions in parallel. They check that the project is on track against conventional performance criteria (schedule, cost, risk), and they check that the project is on trajectory against regenerative criteria. The four gates are deliberately concrete because gates that cannot be measured cannot be enforced, and gates that cannot be enforced are theatre.

Gate 1: Regenerative Potential Gate (Net-Positive Value)

The project must demonstrate measurable net-positive ecological or social value, not merely reduced harm. Evaluation metrics include a regenerative value score, ecosystem service indicators, and social value measures. The pass threshold is a measurable net-positive contribution validated against baseline. This gate distinguishes regenerative projects from sustainable projects that accept an extractive baseline and seek only to moderate it (Mang & Reed, 2012).

Gate 2: Circular Design Gate (Multi-Cycle Materials)

Materials must be designed for multiple use cycles, with validated take-back systems in place and material passports for major components (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017; McDonough & Braungart, 2002). The pass threshold is that at least 80 percent of materials have documented end-of-life pathways, with functioning take-back systems. Materials without a pathway do not enter the project.

Gate 3: Waste Minimisation Gate (Waste to Resource)

Waste streams must be eliminated or converted, with biological and technical cycling optimised and design-for-disassembly embedded. The pass threshold is at least 90 percent waste diversion from landfill or incineration, with auditable documentation. This gate applies the circular economy principle that waste is a design failure, not an inevitable byproduct (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2015).

Gate 4: Ecosystem Health Gate (Life-Enhancing Impact)

The project must enhance ecosystem function, with measurable improvements in habitat, soil, water, or air quality and with restoration commitments funded (Pedersen Zari, 2018). The pass threshold is at least two ecosystem indicators improved against baseline. Net neutrality is not a regenerative threshold. This gate also institutionalises stakeholder voice integration by requiring

that affected communities, ecosystem representatives, and future generations have presence in governance rather than consultation status alone, drawing on Indigenous practices of multi-generational responsibility (Kimmerer, 2013).

A project can fail any of these gates without necessarily being cancelled. Gate failure triggers a structured response: approve (all gates pass, proceed to execution, track regenerative metrics); revise and resubmit (gates not met, return to Phases 1 through 3, resubmit after redesign); or escalate (criteria conflict with the business case, escalate to Phase 5 portfolio governance for executive trade-off decision). The point is not that every project must meet every criterion the first time. The point is that the criteria are visible, measured, and non-negotiable, which is what distinguishes regenerative governance from sustainability vocabulary bolted on to conventional governance (Hahn et al., 2018).

> *Projects do not fail at the end. They fail at the beginning. Once materials are selected, supply chains locked, and designs finalised, the majority of impacts are irreversible. The four gates exist because the decision window in which those trajectories can still be changed is narrow, and it closes quickly.*

5. A Case in Practice: Oklahoma 2020

The Oklahoma response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 is not a case of RPM being applied in full. The framework had not been fully specified then. But the response operated under conditions that revealed, in practice, what regenerative project governance actually requires, and what conventional governance could not deliver.

In March 2020, the state needed to coordinate an emergency response that eventually included more than 500 organisations and a federal funding portfolio of approximately 1.2 billion dollars (Hammond, 2024). The coordination structure available at the start of the response was conventional. Hierarchical reporting. Centralised decision authority. Standard grant-management logic. Within three weeks, that structure had been replaced, not by design but by necessity, with something much closer to what RPM would later specify as governance architecture. Four features of that replacement structure map directly onto RPM principles.

5.1 Problem framing replaced task assignment

Early in the response, most coordination conversations were about who would do what task. Those conversations consistently produced the wrong tasks. The conversation that worked was different. The coordination calls opened with a structured question about what problem the community in front of us was actually solving and whose problem it was. The answer, most weeks, was not the answer we had been working on. Reframing the problem changed the project every time. This is

Phase 0 in practice. The highest-leverage work was not executing tasks. It was re-scoping what the project was.

5.2 Decision authority moved to the edge

The organisations closest to the affected communities had the best information and the worst position in the authority hierarchy. The governance structure that actually worked pushed decision authority outward. The approach followed what my doctoral research later articulated as Commander's Intent governance (Hammond, 2024): establish clear regenerative purpose (protect community health and economic resilience simultaneously), distribute decision authority to autonomous organisations closest to the system, and audit outcomes against the purpose rather than dictating individual decisions. This is the distributed intelligence pattern that biomimicry research identifies in mycorrhizal networks, murmurations, and other living systems (Simard, 2021). It is also what Phase 5 portfolio governance looks like when it is working.

5.3 Feedback loops shortened

Conventional grant management runs on quarterly reporting. Communities in crisis do not have a quarter. We built feedback loops that ran in hours and days rather than weeks and months. Information about what was working and what was not working travelled back to the coordinating body almost in real time. Decisions were revised almost in real time in response. The project was not a plan being executed. It was a plan being continuously rewritten by the information the plan itself was generating. This is the feedback-rich governance that RPM Phase 4 decision gates are designed to enable (Sterman, 2006).

5.4 Legacy and restoration were treated as primary outputs

The conventional frame for an emergency response is stabilisation and exit. Do what needs doing, spend what needs spending, close the books, stand down. The response that actually worked treated legacy as a primary output. What community capacity would remain after the federal funding ended? What relationships would still exist? What would be the state of the nonprofit ecosystem, the healthcare network, the local supply chains, a year after closure? Those questions shaped decisions during the response, not after it. Two years after the acute phase, the coordination infrastructure built during the response, the relationships, the communication channels, the shared decision protocols, was still operating. This is Phase 6 in practice. Completion as return, not as exit.

The Oklahoma case is not proof that RPM works. It is evidence that when conditions force conventional project governance to fail, the governance pattern that emerges as the workable alternative resembles, in its working features, what RPM would later specify. The question the

case raises is whether practitioners must wait for a crisis to adopt a governance pattern that the conditions of the 21st century already require.

6. Four Tools You Can Use on Your Next Project

The argument of this paper is structural. But structural arguments are easier to adopt when they come with tools that operate within existing authority. The four tools below are drawn from the author's consulting and teaching practice and have been tested with practitioners in infrastructure, digital transformation, and public sector reform contexts. All four operate within whatever governance structure an organisation currently has. No new methodology is required. No new software.

Tool 1: The Problem Reframing Protocol

Before any material or social decision is made, run this four-step protocol. It takes ten minutes and produces a one-sentence governance artefact that creates an audit trail of what was considered at problem definition. Step one: identify the user. Not the sponsor. Not the client organisation. Who is actually affected by this decision, including those not in the room? Step two: empathise. What are they trying to do? What do they need this decision to produce for their system to remain viable? Step three: rewrite the problem. Restate the problem in terms of the affected party's need, not the project's constraint. Step four: add the material question. What does this capability, if delivered, require from physical or ecological systems, and where do those materials go at end of life? The output sentence is: '[User] needs [capability] because [insight] and this requires [material implication].' Most problem reframing exercises stop at step three. Step four is the extension that connects the human need to the physical and ecological systems that must absorb the cost of meeting it.

Tool 2: The Transparency-Based Decision Log

You already have a decision log. Add four fields. What environmental and social information was considered at this decision point? What information was absent, and why? What trade-off was made? Who was accountable? Those four fields, added to a template already in use, take five minutes to fill in and are worth five minutes. They are what makes accountability possible after the fact. They also create the audit trail that regulators, communities, and future auditors need when a downstream consequence becomes visible and someone asks what the project knew and when.

Tool 3: The Stakeholder Impact Visibility Map

You already use a stakeholder map. Extend it with two new axes. Does this stakeholder receive impact or create impact? How far downstream from the project does their impact fall? These two

axes surface stakeholders who are currently outside conventional governance frames: communities downstream of construction sites, ecosystems affected by supply chain decisions, future occupants of infrastructure, second-order supply chain workers. They exist. They just are not on the current map. The mycorrhizal stakeholder network literature (Simard, 2021) offers a useful analogue: stakeholders are interconnected nodes in living networks where value flows multi-directionally and the health of each affects all.

Tool 4: The Regenerative Materiality Checklist

Three questions, five minutes, at every specification review gate. Does this material re-enter a biological or technical cycle? Who absorbs the end-of-life cost if it does not? Is there an alternative specification that closes the loop? If all three produce a yes, the specification is regenerative. If they produce a no, the project has documented that it knew the implication and proceeded anyway. That is accountability, even when it is not the outcome we want. For organisations subject to the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive, this checklist is also the operational bridge between double materiality reporting and project-level decision-making. The project is where strategy meets reporting. What gets specified, procured, and delivered is what the organisation reports.

7. Implications for Practice

Regenerative Project Management is not a replacement for the competencies the profession has built over the last half century. Scope control, risk management, schedule management, stakeholder engagement, quality assurance: all of these remain essential. RPM reframes what those competencies are in service of and extends the range across which they operate.

The most concrete way to describe the shift is as a change in the project manager's role. Conventional practice trains the project manager as task coordinator, schedule manager, and delivery enforcer. Regenerative practice asks for something different: systems thinker, boundary challenger, and steward of long-term outcomes. The required capabilities follow from the role. Lifecycle thinking. Systems mapping. Ethical decision-making under uncertainty. None of these replace the conventional competencies. They extend them. Several practical implications follow.

7.1 Project managers: expand upstream

The single most important thing an individual project manager can do is insert themselves into Phase 0 conversations that their organisation currently treats as pre-project. Be in the room when the opportunity is being framed. Ask the regenerative questions before the business case is written. What problem is this actually solving? Whose problem is it? What will this leave behind? These are questions the profession has historically been taught to defer to sponsors and executives. The

evidence of the last decade is that sponsors and executives will not ask them unless the project manager does.

7.2 PMOs: become regenerative intelligence functions

The PMO in a regenerative organisation is not primarily a scheduling and compliance function. It is the organisation's institutional capacity to learn from projects and feed that learning into future opportunity assessment. This requires PMOs to invest in portfolio-level scoring, in structured capture of regenerative outcomes, and in the feedback loops that carry Phase 6 learning back into Phase 0 opportunity assessment. PMOs that cannot make this shift will find themselves managing compliance against regulatory frameworks their organisations are structurally unable to meet.

7.3 The profession: update what we certify

PMBOK's 8th edition already moves in this direction, making stewardship a core principle and acknowledging that project managers are accountable for value beyond the project boundary. The GPM P5 Standard (Carboni et al., 2018) integrates people, planet, and prosperity considerations into project processes. These are meaningful steps. What remains is structural extension: Phase 0 and Phase 6 as explicit lifecycle phases; gate criteria with measurable thresholds; and portfolio-level governance that treats regenerative intelligence as a primary organisational capability. The Project Management Institute projects that the profession will require up to 30 million additional project professionals globally by 2035 (Project Management Institute, 2025). Whether those practitioners are trained against an extended lifecycle or a conventional one will determine, at scale, whether project management becomes part of the regenerative transition or remains an obstacle to it.

8. Conclusion: From Execution to Stewardship

Projects are where organisations convert intent into material reality. If an organisation's stated commitments on sustainability, climate, and regeneration are not showing up in what its projects deliver, then the commitments are not commitments. They are marketing. The project manager sits at the point in the organisation where this is visible earliest and most clearly.

Regenerative Project Management is an attempt to give the profession a framework adequate to that position. It extends the lifecycle to include the phases where the most consequential decisions are actually made. It embeds biomimicry and circularity into governance structures. It specifies four gate criteria that can be measured and enforced. It reframes the project manager's role from executor to steward. None of this is beyond what the profession is capable of. Much of it is already being done in pieces by practitioners who have recognised that the conventional frame is not adequate to the work in front of them.

The shift from execution to stewardship requires organisational support, PMO operationalisation, professional body certification, and university programme teaching. But it begins, every time, with an individual project manager deciding that the project they are leading will be a regenerative project, not because the organisation has formally adopted RPM, but because the conditions of the world the project will operate in require it.

> *The future of project management is not about doing projects better. It is about doing better projects. That is the invitation. It begins with the next project.*

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