Misaligned Stakeholders: How to Diagnose the Gap Between Formal Approval and Operational Reality [1]

Luca Paolo Giuseppe Prinzio

Abstract

Many projects do not fail because they lack methodology, planning tools or governance processes. More often, they fail because the alignment declared by stakeholders does not correspond to real operational alignment. Approved charters, completed RACI matrices, authorised budgets, shared milestones and formally correct minutes may give the impression that the project is under control. However, in day-to-day practice, priorities diverge, responsibilities remain ambiguous, dependencies are not managed, operational teams are not truly ready and suppliers are unable to deliver what they have declared.

This article analyses the hidden cost of stakeholder misalignment, distinguishing between formal alignment — documents, signatures, roles and approvals — and real alignment: actual understanding, operational priorities, coherent incentives, available capabilities and responsibilities that are genuinely assumed. Through five recurring patterns in complex projects, the article shows how the Project Manager can diagnose latent misalignment before it becomes a crisis. It also discusses the limits of traditional tools, in particular the RACI matrix, when it is used as a surrogate for real alignment rather than as a support for organisational clarity.

The central thesis is that the Project Manager should not limit themselves to managing stakeholders in a formal sense, but should learn to diagnose operational misalignment. The real project is not what is approved on paper, but what is actually understood, supported and made executable by those who must contribute to it and by those who will have to operate its result over time.

Keywords: *stakeholder management, misalignment, project governance, RACI, operational readiness, Project Manager, risk management, blame culture, organisational dependencies.*

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Introduction – The Paradox of Approval

Let us imagine a very common scene. It is the final project steering committee meeting before the definitive go-ahead. The main stakeholders are present, either in the room or by videoconference. The Project Manager presents the latest version of the plan. The milestones are clear, the budget has been approved, the RACI matrix is complete, the project charter bears the signatures of the main sponsors, the cybersecurity lead has given their clearance, the service manager has confirmed the availability of operational resources and the supplier has signed the contract.

At a certain point, the ritual question is asked: "Are we all aligned?" Positive answers follow, together with nods of agreement and a few reassuring comments. The project is formally approved. It can start.

And yet, a few months later, something jams.

Activities dependent on the Operations team slip because "it was not clear that this was also required". The supplier delivers late because "the requirements were not detailed enough". The technical solution, perfectly functional in the laboratory, generates incidents in production because no one knows how to operate it safely. The application team declares that some infrastructure dependencies had been taken for granted. Cybersecurity requests further checks that no one had planned. Procurement cannot meet the timing required to acquire a critical licence. The climate deteriorates and the typical phrases of projects entering crisis begin to appear: "That was not my responsibility"; "If they had told me earlier"; "We had not understood that the project would also affect us"; "The plan did not take our constraints into account".

The Project Manager, despite having done many of the things prescribed by the manuals, finds themselves managing a crisis that does not immediately appear to be a methodological error. The stakeholders had been mapped. The plan had been approved. The RACI had been produced. Minutes existed. Signatures had been collected. And yet the project was not truly aligned.

This is the paradox of approval: formal alignment does not guarantee real alignment.

A project may be formally approved by all stakeholders and still be operationally blocked, because the people who are expected to contribute do not really share the priorities, do not

have the necessary skills, do not have sufficient resources, are not incentivised to collaborate, or have not been put in a position to sustain the result over time.

Professional analyses of misalignment confirm this phenomenon. Layer 10 (2025) observes that stakeholder misalignment rarely begins with major explosions; more often, it starts silently, with unverified assumptions, delays in technology strategy, misunderstandings about architecture, or decisions made without full awareness of their operational consequences.

The thesis of this article is that the Project Manager should not merely obtain approvals, but should diagnose latent misalignment. The question is not only: "Who approved?". The more important question is: "Who has really understood, accepted, supported and made operable what has been approved?".

1. Methodological Approach

Before presenting the patterns of misalignment and the tools for diagnosing them, it is useful to clarify the basis on which this article is founded.

This article does not present the results of a single original empirical study. It is based on a secondary analysis of professional and academic sources, combined with the direct observation of recurring patterns in complex project environments, including critical infrastructure, cloud, cybersecurity and digital transformation in large public and corporate contexts.

The sources used belong to three categories.

Academic sources — Elkner, 2025; Weick, 1995; Edmondson, 2018; Kotter, 1985 — provide the theoretical framework for understanding phenomena such as goal misalignment, sensemaking in ambiguous contexts, psychological safety and influence without authority.

Specialist professional sources — Overbring, 2024; Future-Bridge, 2025; Layer 10, 2025; BE Formazione, 2024 — offer operational analyses of RACI, misalignment and stakeholder management in EPC, software development and infrastructure contexts.

Supporting sources — Planview, 2021; Trunk, 2025 — are used with the necessary caution for their illustrative value.

The five patterns of misalignment presented in Section 3 were identified through a process of pattern recognition across recurring project experiences. They do not constitute a universal taxonomy, nor are they derived from a statistically representative case base. Rather, they are typical situations observed with sufficient frequency to be generalised as recurring patterns. Their usefulness is primarily practical: to provide the Project Manager with a recognition framework for early diagnosis of risk situations.

The patterns are presented in anonymised and generalised form, without references to specific organisations, projects, suppliers or individuals. This choice is consistent with the practice of professional project management literature, which favours the generalisation of patterns over the description of individual cases that are not easily transferable.

2. Formal Alignment and Real Alignment

To understand the cost of misalignment, it is necessary to distinguish between two dimensions that are often confused: formal alignment and real alignment.

Formal alignment is what appears in project documents. It is the visible, explicit, contractual and verifiable dimension. It includes approval signatures, the project charter, the RACI matrix, shared milestones, the project plan, meeting minutes, contractual clauses, compliance policies and formally declared acceptance criteria. This type of alignment is necessary. Without formalised approvals, roles, constraints and responsibilities, a complex project has no solid basis on which to start and lacks a common language for governing decisions, responsibilities and changes.

However, formal alignment is not enough.

Real alignment concerns what happens in day-to-day practice. It is not what people have signed, but what they are actually willing and able to do. It concerns the actual understanding of objectives, the consistency between declared priorities and operational priorities, the real availability of resources, the presence of adequate skills, the existence of coherent incentives, the ability to make decisions and the willingness of stakeholders to support the project when difficulties emerge.

A stakeholder may approve a plan without fully understanding its operational implications. A manager may sign a RACI without having resources actually available. A team may be marked as “responsible” for a given activity without having the tools, access rights or skills to carry it out. A supplier may contractually commit to providing support, but not be truly

able to guarantee it at critical moments. A committee may approve a milestone, but fail to assume the decisions required when that milestone comes under pressure from time, cost or quality constraints.

The critical point is that the project may appear healthier precisely when it is most dangerous: everything is formally in order, but the real system is not ready.

Elkner's document (2025) on misalignment between stakeholders and project management recalls an important principle: in complex projects, stakeholders may have very different objectives and expectations and, if these objectives are not aligned, the project risks being pulled in conflicting directions. The text emphasises that alignment requires clarity, trust and mutual accountability, not only formally declared objectives.

The area of greatest risk is the one in which formal alignment is present but real alignment is absent. If formal alignment is also missing, the problem is evident: the project does not start, is not approved, does not obtain budget or is stopped. If, however, formal alignment exists but real alignment is missing, the project starts anyway. And precisely for this reason it becomes dangerous. The crisis does not appear at the beginning, but during execution, when the cost of correction has already increased.

The Project Manager must learn to read the weak signals of real misalignment: silence in meetings, vague answers, approvals that are too quick, stakeholders who always delegate, operational teams with little involvement, suppliers who avoid concrete testing, dependencies taken for granted, procedures "to be written later", training activities relegated to the end of the project. These are all indicators of possible misalignment between what the project declares and what the organisation is really able to sustain.

3. The Five Patterns of Misalignment

Stakeholder misalignment does not always manifest itself in the same way. In complex projects, however, it tends to recur through certain recognisable patterns. The following patterns are generalised and anonymised. They do not refer to specific organisations, people, suppliers or projects, but describe situations that are easily recognisable in infrastructure, technology, cloud, cybersecurity, critical systems and organisational transformation contexts.

Pattern 1 – The New Capability That No One Knows How to Operate

The project introduces a new technology or organisational capability: an encryption system, a backup platform, a key management tool, a database cluster, a monitoring solution, or a cloud service. The solution is installed, configured, tested in the laboratory and declared ready. The supplier has delivered, functional tests are positive and the project team has completed its activities. Formally, the project is close to closure.

Then the transition into operations arrives and it becomes clear that the team that will have to operate the solution is not ready. Credentials, runbooks, incident management procedures, practical training, restore tests, escalation rules and out-of-hours support coverage are missing. The capability exists, but it is not operable. The project is formally successful and operationally incomplete.

The misalignment, in this case, is between those who approve the project and those who will have to operate its result over time. The former look at project criteria: installation, configuration, testing and technical documentation. The latter live with operational criteria: can I access it? do I know what to do at three in the morning? do I know how to restore it? do I know whom to call? do I know what risks I am assuming? If these questions have not been addressed as project deliverables, misalignment is already present.

Pattern 2 – The Robust Architecture That No One Knows How to Run

A solution is designed to guarantee high availability, operational continuity or disaster recovery. The architecture is technically correct: clusters, replication, failover, load balancing, automation. In the laboratory, everything works. But when a real incident occurs, the organisational system is unable to manage the complexity produced by the technical solution. No one knows with certainty who must authorise a promotion, what data loss is acceptable, how to verify consistency after a failover, which communications must be sent, or which procedures must be followed if the automation fails.

Here the problem is not the architecture in itself. The problem is that the architecture assumes an operational maturity that the organisation does not yet possess. RTOs and RPOs are defined in documents, but have not been translated into exercises, runbooks, roles and operational capabilities. Technical robustness does not become real resilience, because resilience is not only a property of the infrastructure: it is a property of the overall socio-technical system.

Pattern 3 – The Supplier Chosen by Those Who Will Not Have to Use It

The supplier is selected through formal criteria: cost, references, certifications, tender documents, commercial presentations and declared capabilities. Everything appears coherent. But during execution, it emerges that support is slow, the quality of responses is low, key people change frequently, customisations take a long time, actual availability does not correspond to operational needs and declared skills are not fully available.

The misalignment here is between selection criteria and use criteria. Those who choose the supplier evaluate what can be measured in the procurement procedure. Those who work with the supplier evaluate what is needed in reality: competence, responsiveness, continuity, the ability to take ownership of problems and support at critical moments. If the technical team had expressed reservations and these remained opinions rather than being transformed into formal risks, the project lost a diagnostic opportunity.

Pattern 4 – Declared Compliance That Can Never Be Exercised

The project produces compliance documentation: policies, backup plans, restore procedures, disaster recovery plans, encryption evidence, impact analyses and security documents. Compliance appears to be satisfied. Then an incident, an audit or a restore request occurs, and it becomes clear that backups are not truly restorable, disaster recovery has never been tested, cryptographic keys cannot be recovered in emergency scenarios, or access segregation does not correspond to operational practice.

Here the misalignment is between documentary compliance and exercisable compliance. The first demonstrates that something has been planned. The second demonstrates that something works when needed. In critical projects, the acceptance criterion should not be "backup scheduled", but "restore verified"; not "DR plan approved", but "DR exercised"; not "encryption enabled", but "data recoverable even in the event of failure of the key management components". Compliance that is not exercised is a promise, not a capability.

Pattern 5 – The Project That Depends on What It Does Not Control

Many projects depend on teams or services outside their direct perimeter: network, security, facilities, procurement, identity management, HR, operations, third-party suppliers, change management and authorisations. The plan assumes that these dependencies will be available when needed. But when the project needs them, it emerges that the network is not ready, the firewall requires approval times that had not been

foreseen, procurement cannot complete the purchase, the security team has other priorities, or the promised skills have not been allocated.

The misalignment here is between the project team's plan and the real capability of the extended organisation. The most dangerous phrase in these cases is: "We take it for granted". Unmanaged dependencies are risks disguised as assumptions. Until they have an owner, a date, a verification criterion and an escalation path, they are not governed.

These five patterns have one element in common: the project does not fail because a document is missing. It fails because the document has not made visible the distance between what had been approved and what was actually executable.

4. The Limits of Traditional Tools: When RACI Is Not Enough

After observing these patterns, the question becomes inevitable: why do traditional stakeholder management tools not prevent them? Why does the RACI matrix, despite being a tool designed to clarify roles and responsibilities, often fail to identify real misalignment? The answer is not that RACI is useless. That would be a superficial conclusion. RACI is a useful tool when it is necessary to clarify who does what, who approves, who must be consulted and who must be informed. It is particularly effective when interfaces are clear, responsibilities must be documented, relationships are contractual or compliance requires formal evidence. BE Formazione (2024) correctly describes it as a responsibility assignment matrix that helps avoid ambiguity, improve communication and collaboration, reveal gaps in responsibility and optimise resource allocation, provided that it is validated, shared and updated regularly.

The problem arises when RACI is assigned a function that it cannot perform: demonstrating real alignment.

RACI answers a formal question: who should be responsible, accountable, consulted or informed? It does not automatically answer deeper questions: does that person really have time? Do they have the skills? Do they have authority? Do they have coherent incentives? Have they understood the context? Have they accepted the responsibility? Do they have the necessary tools? Can they act when needed? Do they have a functioning escalation line? If these questions remain outside the process, RACI can create a misleading sense of control. Overbring Labs (2024) clearly highlights the risk of RACI as a documentary artefact in knowledge-based and collaborative projects: it can become a document produced to satisfy a gate and then used little in practice, or a tool that generates overload and an illusion

of clarity while the real relationships between stakeholders change. Future-Bridge Americas (2025), observing EPC workflows, underlines that obsolete RACI matrices, untracked deviations, vague ownership and weak escalation paths can generate invisible risks, rework, delays and loss of trust in governance models.

RACI can also fuel a blame culture when used defensively. Instead of encouraging collaboration, it can become a tool for delimiting one's own perimeter and shifting problems elsewhere. This happens especially when the organisation already has a low level of trust. In that context, the matrix does not cure the disease; at most, it organises it. If people do not collaborate because incentives are misaligned, because functions protect themselves, because risk is punished, or because stakeholders do not trust one another, a more detailed RACI does not solve the problem.

The issue, therefore, is not whether to use RACI or not. The issue is to use it for what it is: a tool for formal clarity, not a guarantee of operational alignment. In complex projects, RACI should be accompanied by other tools: skills mapping, dependency mapping, operational readiness reviews, decision logs, escalation paths, periodic review of responsibilities, perceived alignment surveys and reassessment of readiness conditions.

RACI says who should do something. The Project Manager must verify whether that "who" can, wants to, knows how to and has the conditions to do it.

5. Diagnostic Tools: Recognising Existing Misalignment

Diagnosing latent misalignment means shifting attention from what has been approved to what is actually executable. Diagnosis does not require new bureaucratic artefacts, but a set of targeted checks that make undeclared assumptions visible before they become blockers.

The first tool is the operational readiness review. Many projects treat the transition into operations as a final, almost administrative phase. In reality, in complex projects, operational readiness should be a verifiable acceptance condition. It is not enough to ask whether the solution works. It is necessary to ask whether those who will have to operate it are ready to do so.

A serious review examines access rights, credentials, operating manuals, runbooks, training, escalation, supplier support, backup and restore procedures, monitoring, responsibilities in the event of an incident and the ability to operate outside working hours.

Above all, it should not be conducted only by the project team, which has an interest in closing the project, but should involve the team that will inherit operational responsibility.
The second tool is the mapping of hidden dependencies. Traditional stakeholder analysis tends to focus on power and interest. But many blockers come from parties that have no particular interest in the project and may not formally be part of it, yet on which the project depends. The network team, procurement, change management, cybersecurity, identity management, facilities, HR and indirect suppliers can all become bottlenecks.

For every critical dependency, the Project Manager should ask: who do we depend on? what must be available? by when? with what verification criterion? who is the owner? what is the escalation path? A dependency that is not translated into an activity, milestone or precondition remains a hope.

The third tool is the verification of training as an acceptance condition. In technology projects, training is often compressed at the end, reduced to an information session or to a document to be read. But if the project's outcome must be operated by people, those people's competence is part of the product, not an accessory.

This means defining acceptance criteria linked to training: people trained, practical checks, simulations, shadowing, shift coverage, updated manuals and the availability of at least two people capable of operating the solution in critical contexts.

The fourth tool is periodic surveys of perceived alignment. Misalignment is often perceived by people long before it appears in KPIs. A team knows when priorities are unclear, when dependencies are underestimated, when a decision is being avoided, when a supplier is not credible, or when a procedure will not work in an emergency. But people do not always feel authorised to say so openly.

A short, anonymous and periodic survey can surface divergences in priorities, expected obstacles, skills gaps, unmanaged dependencies and areas of mistrust. If 40% of the team does not have a clear view of the priorities for the next thirty days, the problem is not motivational: it is a governance problem. If several teams flag the same dependency as a risk, the Project Manager has an early signal to escalate.

6. Preventive Tools: Avoiding Misalignment at Source

Diagnosis identifies misalignment when it is already present, even if it has not yet exploded. Prevention acts earlier, in the design of governance. The two levels are distinct but complementary.

The first preventive tool is decision forcing at every approval. In traditional governance, the stakeholder is often asked to approve: approve the plan, approve the budget, approve the milestone, approve the deliverable. This approval is important, but it can remain passive. A stakeholder may say "yes" without clarifying what is required from their team, which constraints they see, which assumptions they do not share, or which risks they consider underestimated.

A more mature governance model does not ask only: "Do you approve?". It asks: "What is required from you or your team to make this project sustainable?". This question forces the stakeholder to move from an authorising position to a contributing position. It is no longer enough to validate a document; preconditions, contributions, constraints and responsibilities must be declared.

The second preventive tool is supplier verification before the critical dependency arises. Commercial promises must be tested before the project becomes dependent on them. Response times, support quality, availability, technical competence, continuity of key people, ability to manage incidents and quality of documentation should all be verified at a stage when the project still has room to correct the choice or renegotiate the conditions.

The third preventive tool is the periodic review of roles and responsibilities. In complex projects, roles and responsibilities change throughout the lifecycle. What is clear during design may no longer be clear during testing, production transition or operational management. A RACI built at the beginning and never reviewed describes a snapshot that almost certainly no longer corresponds to reality.

Governance should include periodic reviews of roles, especially at phase transitions. Not a single, static RACI, but a dynamic responsibility model that is reconsidered when the work, stakeholders, risks and dependencies change.

The fourth preventive tool is the traceability of decisions and assumptions. Many misalignments arise because the context of decisions is lost. People change, teams rotate, suppliers replace their contacts, documents accumulate, but no one remembers why a

choice was made, which risks were accepted, or which trade-offs were discussed. Future-Bridge (2025) specifically recalls the issue of lost institutional memory in long workflows.

A well-managed decision log is not bureaucracy. It is organisational memory. It helps prevent every new stakeholder from reopening decisions already made or inheriting responsibilities without understanding their rationale. The traceability of assumptions — what was taken for granted, by whom and with what consequences — is equally important.

7. Conclusion: What Changes in the Role of the Project Manager

Stakeholder misalignment is not a marginal risk. It is one of the most frequent mechanisms through which technically well-structured projects enter crisis. Its distinctive feature is that it often remains invisible until it is too late, because it does not manifest itself in the absence of documents or approvals, but in the distance between what the documents declare and what reality permits.

The five patterns described in this article show that this distance is neither random nor unpredictable. It takes recurring forms: the technical capability that the operational team does not know how to operate; the robust architecture that the organisation does not know how to run; the supplier selected through criteria that do not correspond to real use; compliance that exists on paper but not in practice; and dependencies that the project takes for granted but does not manage. Recognising these patterns is the first step towards intervening before misalignment turns into crisis.

The Project Manager who relies exclusively on formal alignment — signatures, RACI, milestones — silently exposes themselves to this risk. Not because formal tools are useless, but because they do not answer the questions that truly matter: are the promised resources really available? is the operational team really ready? is the supplier really capable? is compliance really exercisable? are dependencies really managed? are stakeholders really engaged?

Adopting a diagnostic perspective means redefining the perimeter of the Project Manager's role on three levels.

At the level of tools, RACI and formal milestones are not abandoned, but are complemented by readiness checks, hidden dependency mapping and periodic perceived alignment surveys. The tool is no longer an end in itself, but becomes a means of making visible the distance between form and substance.

At the level of questions, the PM stops asking only "has the activity been completed?" and starts asking "do the real conditions exist for the activity to produce the expected result?". Verifying conditions becomes as central as verifying progress.

At the level of governance, the PM does not accept approvals as an end point, but as the beginning of a verification. Every formal "yes" is interrogated: what is required from the person who approved in order to make the project sustainable? What risks are they assuming? What conditions must they guarantee?

This redefinition does not make the PM's work heavier in bureaucratic terms. It makes it lighter in terms of crises to be managed later. Early diagnosis of misalignment is an investment: it costs time and attention in the initial phases, but drastically reduces the cost of emergencies in the later phases.

The real project is not what is approved on paper. It is what is actually understood and supported by those who must contribute and by those who will have to operate the result over time. The Project Manager who learns to diagnose misalignment stops chasing the consequences — delays, conflicts, rework — and starts governing the causes.

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Note on Anonymisation

The five patterns described in this article are anonymised and generalised. They do not refer to specific organisations, projects, suppliers or individuals. They are patterns observable in many complex projects and have been formulated generically to allow analysis without reference to identifiable contexts.

Note on the Use of AI

During the preparation of this article, artificial intelligence tools were used solely to assist in translation from Italian to English and to improve the linguistic clarity of the text. All content, analyses, arguments, and conclusions are entirely the work of the author, who maintains full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and validity of the presented work. No part of the substantive content was generated by AI.

About the Author

Luca Paolo Giuseppe Prinzio

Turin, Italy

Luca Paolo Giuseppe Prinzio is a certified Project Manager and Database Administrator at CSI Piemonte in Turin, Italy, where he participates in complex projects on cloud and security. For over twenty years he has worked in the ICT world and carries out teaching and consulting activities in the field of Project Management. He can be contacted at lprinzio@gmail.com and linkedin.com/in/lprinzio