Projects Don't Fail—Relationships Do: A Leadership Perspective on Stakeholder Engagement and Project Resilience [1, 2]

Jennifer F. Jones, PgMP, PMP, DASM

Abstract

Project management practice has traditionally emphasized technical competence, standardized methodologies, and control mechanisms as primary drivers of project success. However, as projects become more complex, stakeholder-intensive, and increasingly agile or hybrid in nature, technical proficiency alone has proven insufficient. Persistent challenges related to stakeholder alignment, team engagement, and sustained performance under uncertainty highlight the need for leadership approaches that strengthen relational capacity and project management resilience. This paper applies two modern leadership theories: servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) and Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). These are complementary frameworks for project leadership across traditional, agile, and hybrid environments. Using an applied, practice-oriented methodology, the paper synthesizes peer-reviewed leadership research with practitioner case examples drawn from contemporary project settings. The findings indicate that high-quality leader–member exchanges and servant leadership behaviors contribute to stronger stakeholder relationships, improved team engagement, and enhanced project resilience in the face of disruption and change. The paper concludes that resilient project outcomes are not solely driven by methodology or technical expertise, but by the project manager's ability to intentionally cultivate trust-based relationships that enable adaptability, sustained performance, and value delivery in complex project environments.

Keywords: *project management, relational leadership, Leader–Member Exchange theory, servant leadership, stakeholder engagement, project resilience, agile leadership, organizational change*

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INTRODUCTION

The discipline of project management has long rested on a foundation of technical competence. Frameworks such as the PMBOK® Guide have equipped practitioners with tools for managing scope, schedule, budget, risk, and resources—the canonical variables of project delivery. These tools are necessary and their disciplined application has improved delivery outcomes across industries and project types. Yet a persistent pattern emerges in complex project environments: projects that satisfy every technical criterion for success and still fail to produce lasting organizational value. This pattern persists not because risk management frameworks are inadequate, but because the risk categories most practitioners track — scope, schedule, budget, and resources — represent only a portion of the true risk surface area of complex projects. The risks that most reliably explain the gap between delivery and value are relational, behavioral, and organizational. They are rarely visible on dashboards. They compound quietly. And they become visible only after go-live, when the window for intervention has closed (Jones, 2026a).

The gap between delivery and value is not a new observation. Researchers and practitioners have long noted that technical success is a necessary but insufficient condition for transformation (Kotter, 1996). What remains underexplored in the project management literature, however, is the mechanism through which relational leadership (specifically the quality of the relationships a project manager builds with team members and stakeholders) either closes or widens that gap.

This paper argues that relational leadership is not a supplementary competency for project managers but a primary one. As project environments grow more stakeholder-intensive, more iterative, and more dependent on organizational adoption for value realization, the project manager's ability to build, sustain, and leverage high-quality relationships becomes a core determinant of project resilience and outcome quality. Two established leadership theories (Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory and servant leadership) provide the conceptual scaffolding for this argument and the practical tools to operationalize it.

The paper is structured as follows. Section two reviews the limitations of the technical competence model in contemporary project environments. Section three introduces LMX theory as a diagnostic lens for assessing relationship quality across project teams and stakeholder ecosystems. Section four examines servant leadership as a strategic posture that builds the relational infrastructure projects require. Section five presents practical application frameworks derived from both theories. Section six discusses implications for project leadership practice and offers directions for further research.

THE LIMITS OF TECHNICAL COMPETENCE IN COMPLEX PROJECT ENVIRONMENTS

The traditional project management value proposition centers on control and predictability. By decomposing work into manageable units, establishing clear accountability structures, and monitoring progress against baseline plans, project managers reduce execution risk and improve the probability of on-time, on-budget delivery. This model performs well in stable environments characterized by known solutions, fixed requirements, and limited stakeholder complexity, which Jones (2026g) classifies as "predictable work."

Contemporary project portfolios, however, are rarely composed exclusively of predictable work. Enterprise IT programs, digital transformation initiatives, ERP implementations, and agile product development efforts introduce forms of complexity that resist the control-and-predictability model. In these environments, requirements evolve, stakeholder interests compete, organizational resistance emerges unpredictably, and the path from delivery to adoption is neither linear nor guaranteed. The primary risks are no longer execution risks; they are relational, behavioral, and organizational.

Whitaker and Sommer (2016) found that stakeholder-related factors (including misaligned expectations, inadequate engagement, and insufficient communication) accounted for a disproportionate share of project failures relative to their representation in formal risk registers. Similarly, the *Pulse of the Profession* report (PMI, 2021) identified "organizational agility," "stakeholder engagement," and "change management" as the top three drivers of project success, each representing a relational competency rather than a technical one. These findings suggest that the dominant model of PM competency development has systematically underinvested in the relational dimensions of leadership.

A related and underexamined dimension of this problem is governance misfit: the application of standardized delivery models to fundamentally different types of project work. When predictable, adaptive, and transformational work are governed identically — with the same approval structures, reporting cadence, and delivery expectations — the friction that results is often misattributed to execution failure. The teams appear to struggle. The underlying issue is structural. This pattern compounds the relational challenges described above, because governance misfit creates the organizational conditions — unclear authority, stalled decisions, competing incentives — under which stakeholder relationships most reliably deteriorate (Jones, 2026g).

The adoption gap (the distance between successful go-live and genuine behavior change) is perhaps the most consequential manifestation of relational underinvestment. Organizations that measure project success at go-live capture delivery performance but miss the variable that actually determines value realization: whether the people the project was designed to serve change the way they work. That change is not produced by methodology. It is produced by trust, engagement, and the relational credibility the project manager has built over the life of the initiative.

This does not diminish the importance of technical competence. Scope discipline, dependency management, and risk identification remain essential. But they are necessary conditions, not sufficient ones. The project manager who brings both technical discipline and relational leadership to complex work is not a rarity to be admired; they represent the standard the profession must set for itself.

LEADER–MEMBER EXCHANGE THEORY AS A PROJECT DIAGNOSTIC

Theoretical Foundation

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory, developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) over more than two decades of research, proposes that leaders do not treat all followers uniformly. Instead, leaders develop differentiated relationships with individual team members, characterized by varying degrees of trust, respect, mutual obligation, and communication openness. These differentiated relationships are categorized along a continuum from high-quality exchanges (characterized by mutual trust, shared commitment, and reciprocal influence—to low-quality exchanges) characterized by transactional compliance, limited discretionary effort, and role-bound communication.

Early formulations of LMX theory described this differentiation as the formation of an "in-group" and an "out-group" around the leader (Dansereau et al., 1975). In-group members receive greater access to information, more developmental opportunities, and higher levels of trust; in turn, they demonstrate greater engagement, initiative, and loyalty. Out-group members operate within formal role boundaries, fulfill their assigned obligations, and rarely exceed minimum performance expectations. The critical finding for project practitioners is this: the quality of the exchange (not the formal authority relationship) is the primary predictor of engagement, communication quality, and adaptive capacity.

LMX in Project Environments

Applied to project management, LMX theory reframes several persistent delivery challenges as relationship quality problems rather than execution problems. When a key stakeholder consistently brings issues forward as urgent escalations rather than early warnings, that pattern is a low-quality exchange signal. When a team member completes assigned work without contributing judgment or flagging emerging risks, that pattern is a low-quality exchange signal. When sprint reviews become status presentations rather than collaborative problem-solving sessions, the product owner relationship has likely drifted toward the out-group.

These signals are often misread as individual performance issues, communication plan failures, or organizational culture problems. LMX theory offers a more precise diagnosis: the relational infrastructure is insufficient to support the kind of information flow and collaborative engagement complex project work requires. The implication is significant. If the root cause is relational, the solution is also relational; and no amount of process improvement or governance redesign will substitute for it.

Research supports this reframing. Epitropaki and Martin (2005) found that high-quality LMX relationships were associated with significantly higher levels of organizational citizenship behavior: the discretionary effort that distinguishes teams that merely deliver from teams that adapt, problem-solve, and sustain outcomes. In project environments, this discretionary effort is precisely what bridges the gap between delivery and value: the extra conversation with a resistant stakeholder, the early flag of a dependency conflict, the informal check-in that surfaces an adoption barrier before it becomes a rollout failure.

LMX and Agile Project Environments

Agile delivery models amplify the effects of LMX quality in ways that are not fully captured by traditional project management research. In a sprint-based environment, the frequency of leader–member interaction is substantially higher than in waterfall delivery. This means that relationship quality (whether high or low) is expressed and reinforced with every planning session, standup, review, and retrospective. A product owner with a low-quality exchange relationship does not give honest feedback in sprint reviews; they give safe feedback, which produces safe products. A team member with a low-quality exchange relationship does not raise design concerns in planning; they build what was specified.

Conversely, high-quality LMX relationships in agile environments create the psychological safety necessary for rapid learning (Edmondson, 1999). Teams that trust their leaders and each other

surface problems earlier, experiment more readily, and recover from setbacks faster. The relational infrastructure does not replace the agile framework—it activates it. Without high-quality exchanges, the ceremonies and cadences of agile delivery become performance rituals rather than genuine learning mechanisms.

Table 1. LMX Quality Indicators and Project Risk Signals

LMX Dimension	High-Quality Exchange Signal	Low-Quality Exchange Signal	Project Risk Implication
Trust	Stakeholder shares real problems early	Issues surface as formal escalations	Late-stage surprises; compressed response time
Communication	Exchanges are substantive and bidirectional	Updates are one-directional and filtered	Hidden dependencies; misaligned expectations
Engagement	Team member contributes judgment, not just output	Team member fulfills role requirements only	Reduced innovation; low adoption after delivery
Mutual Obligation	Both parties invest in the relationship's success	Interaction is transactional and role-bounded	Fragile alignment that breaks under pressure

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AS A PROJECT STRATEGY

Theoretical Foundation

The servant leadership framework, introduced by Robert Greenleaf in 1970 and formalized in his landmark 1977 text, inverts the conventional leadership paradigm. Where traditional leadership models position the leader as the primary agent of direction and control, servant leadership positions the leader as a steward of others' effectiveness. The servant leader's primary question is not "How do I direct this team?" but "What does this team need from me to do their best work?"

Greenleaf's model encompasses ten characteristics of servant leadership, including listening, empathy, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears, 2010). For project practitioners, the most operationally relevant of these are listening (actively attending to team members and stakeholders before proposing solutions), empowerment (structuring decision-making so that judgment is exercised as close to the work as possible), stewardship (treating impacted parties as partners with legitimate interests), and the removal of obstacles (clearing what blocks the team rather than simply monitoring what is blocked).

The Trust–Empowerment Loop

The mechanism through which servant leadership improves project outcomes is best understood as a trust–empowerment loop. When project managers demonstrate consistent servant behaviors (particularly transparency in communicating trade-offs, active listening in stakeholder engagement, and the removal of structural barriers), they build relational trust. That trust enables meaningful delegation, as team members and stakeholders are willing to exercise judgment and take ownership when they trust the environment is safe for honest contribution. Ownership drives engagement, and engagement (particularly in adaptive and transformational work) is what converts delivery into value.

This loop is self-reinforcing when managed intentionally and self-degrading when neglected. A project manager who consistently listens before directing creates an environment in which problems surface early. A project manager who consistently removes obstacles rather than logging them as risks creates an environment in which the team moves faster. A project manager who communicates trade-offs transparently (including when the news is difficult) creates an environment in which stakeholders bring their real concerns rather than their managed ones. Each of these practices is an investment in relational infrastructure that pays compounding dividends over the project lifecycle.

Servant Leadership and Stakeholder Stewardship

The concept of stakeholder stewardship (treating impacted groups as partners with legitimate interests rather than recipients of a project team's plan) is both a servant leadership principle and a risk management discipline. Stakeholder theory, as applied to project environments, holds that the failure to map and engage impacted parties is not merely a communication oversight; it is an unmanaged risk that predictably manifests as resistance, low adoption, and late-stage escalation (Freeman, 1984; Jones, 2026d).

In practice, stakeholder stewardship requires structured prioritization rather than undifferentiated engagement. The relevant criteria for that prioritization are well-established in the stakeholder literature and align closely with practitioner experience: the degree of influence a stakeholder holds over project success, the level of impact they will experience as a result of the project, their capacity to accelerate or obstruct execution, and the long-term operational consequences of inadequate engagement (Jones, 2026d; Freeman, 1984). Applied as a triage framework, these criteria allow project managers to direct relational investment where it will most materially affect adoption and value realization — rather than distributing engagement effort uniformly across a stakeholder population that may number in the dozens.

The servant leader's orientation toward stewardship reframes stakeholder engagement from a process requirement to a strategic imperative. Rather than asking "How often do we communicate with stakeholders?" the stewardship question is "What do stakeholders need to be genuine partners in this change?" This reframing shifts the engagement model from information dissemination to relationship investment, and it is the latter that drives the adoption outcomes complex projects depend on.

Servant Leadership Across Delivery Models

One of the practical strengths of servant leadership as a project framework is its applicability across delivery models. In traditional waterfall environments, servant behaviors such as transparent communication of trade-offs and proactive obstacle removal protect the sequencing discipline that predictable work requires — and compensate for the decision friction that emerges when governance authority is misaligned with delivery responsibility (Jones, 2026e). In agile environments, empowered decision-making and rapid feedback responsiveness activate the learning cycles that adaptive work depends on. In enterprise transformation programs, stakeholder stewardship and visible executive alignment address the organizational resistance that represents the primary risk to transformational work — a risk pattern consistently observed across enterprise system implementations, operating model redesigns, and large-scale organizational change initiatives (Jones, 2026f).

This cross-model applicability is not incidental. Servant leadership is not a delivery methodology; it is a relational posture. It does not prescribe a particular project structure or governance model. It prescribes a particular orientation toward the people inside and around the project; an orientation that holds regardless of whether the delivery cadence is quarterly stage-gate approvals or two-week sprints.

APPLICATION FRAMEWORKS FOR RELATIONAL PROJECT LEADERSHIP

The Relationship Risk Assessment

The Relationship Risk Assessment is a practitioner tool derived from LMX theory and designed to make relationship quality visible as a project risk variable. Project managers applying this framework identify their eight to twelve most critical project relationships, including both team members and key stakeholders, and evaluate each across four dimensions: trust, communication quality, engagement level, and early warning behavior. Each dimension is rated on a three-point behavioral anchor scale, where a score of 1 reflects transactional or rarely-present behaviors, a

score of 2 reflects inconsistent practice, and a score of 3 reflects consistently high-trust behaviors. Aggregate scores flag individual relationships as healthy (10–12 points), at-risk (6–9 points), or a potential blind spot requiring immediate attention (4–5 points).

The diagnostic value of this tool lies not in its precision but in its capacity to surface what practitioners often sense but rarely formalize. Most experienced project managers carry an intuitive awareness of which stakeholder relationships are strained and which team members are disengaged. The Relationship Risk Assessment converts that intuition into a structured risk artifact that can be reviewed, prioritized, and managed with the same intentionality as schedule or budget risk. It also surfaces blind spots: the relationships a project manager may have categorized as stable simply because they have not generated a formal escalation.

Table 2. Relationship Risk Assessment Framework

Dimension	1 – Rarely/ Transactional	2 – Inconsistently	2 – Consistently/ High Trust
Trust	Shares only managed, filtered information	Shares real concerns sometimes, depending on stakes	Surfaces real problems early, without prompting
Communication Quality	Updates are one-directional and surface-level	Exchanges are substantive but only when pushed	Exchanges are honest, bidirectional, and proactive
Engagement Level	Fulfills role requirements; no discretionary effort	Engaged on high-visibility items; disengaged elsewhere	Invested in outcomes, not just deliverables
Early Warning	Issues arrive as urgent escalations	Flags some problems early; others surface late	Consistently surfaces issues before they escalate

The Servant Leadership Behavior Inventory

The Servant Leadership Behavior Inventory translates Greenleaf's framework into five project-specific behaviors, each evaluated through the lens of consistent application. The five behaviors are: obstacle removal (actively identifying and clearing what blocks the team, not merely tracking it as a risk); active listening in stakeholder engagement (structuring stakeholder interactions so that listening precedes problem-solving); empowered decision-making (delegating decisions to the level closest to the work, with the project manager approving rather than designing); transparent communication of trade-offs (sharing difficult information clearly, with context and without spin);

and stakeholder stewardship (treating impacted groups as partners with legitimate interests, engaging their perspective before finalizing decisions that affect them).

Project managers applying this inventory rate their own practice of each behavior as consistent, emerging, or not yet present. The assessment is designed as a self-directed reflection tool rather than a formal evaluation instrument. Its utility lies in identifying the one or two behaviors whose consistent application would most change the relational trajectory of the current project. In practice, most experienced project managers demonstrate strength in two or three of the five behaviors and inconsistency in the remainder; not because of character deficiencies but because the structural demands of project delivery tend to reward control-oriented behaviors over relational ones.

Measuring Relational Health

A persistent challenge in the integration of relational leadership into project practice is the absence of measurement frameworks that make relational health visible in project reviews. Traditional project metrics (schedule variance, budget variance, scope change frequency) capture execution performance but provide no signal about the relational conditions that predict whether that execution will produce value.

A complementary set of relational health metrics can close this gap without replacing delivery metrics. These include: early warning rate (the proportion of project issues that surface before reaching escalation threshold, reflecting the quality of trust and communication across key relationships); stakeholder engagement quality (assessed through the substantiveness of review conversations rather than attendance frequency); team decision autonomy (the degree to which decisions are made at the appropriate level, reflecting the health of the empowerment dimension); and adoption velocity (the rate at which end users operate in new processes or systems post-go-live, reflecting the cumulative effect of stakeholder stewardship over the project lifecycle). These metrics do not require new tracking systems; they require different questions in project reviews and a deliberate habit of treating relational signals as delivery-relevant data.

The adoption velocity metric described above is closely related to what the practitioner literature has termed second-order risk: the downstream organizational consequences of decisions made during delivery that become visible only after go-live (Jones, 2026c). Four diagnostic questions help surface this risk before it compounds: What new constraints will this decision create twelve months from now? What behaviors might this implementation unintentionally reinforce? What technical or cultural debt is being accepted in exchange for current delivery performance? And

where would this solution strain first if required to scale? These questions are relational health questions as much as they are risk questions — because the answers typically surface in organizations where trust-based communication channels exist, and remain hidden where they do not.

DISCUSSION

Implications for Project Leadership Practice

The frameworks presented in this paper carry several implications for how the project management profession develops and evaluates leadership competency. First, if relational quality is a primary determinant of project resilience (as LMX theory and servant leadership research both suggest) then the competency models that govern professional certification must expand to encompass relational leadership as a core domain, not an interpersonal supplement. The current emphasis on technical tools, methodologies, and governance structures, while necessary, is insufficient preparation for the leadership challenges of complex, stakeholder-intensive project work.

Second, the diagnostic tools presented here (the Relationship Risk Assessment and the Servant Leadership Behavior Inventory) point toward a broader practice implication: project managers should conduct relational audits with the same regularity and rigor as technical risk reviews. Relational risk does not appear on dashboards until it has already materialized as a delivery problem. Proactive relationship quality assessment makes that risk visible before it compounds.

A third implication extends beyond individual leadership practice to organizational governance design. The relational failures described throughout this paper do not occur in a vacuum; they are shaped, and often produced, by governance structures that misalign decision authority with delivery responsibility, standardize execution models across fundamentally different work types, and inadvertently prioritize process compliance over outcome accountability (Jones, 2026e; Jones, 2026h). When governance architecture is weak — when escalation paths circulate issues rather than resolving them, when sponsors are accountable for outcomes they cannot control, when the same reporting cadence is applied to adaptive work and predictable work alike — the organizational conditions for low-quality leader–member exchange are actively reinforced. Addressing relational leadership at the individual level is necessary but not sufficient. Mature governance design is the systemic counterpart to individual servant leadership practice.

Finally, the servant leadership framework challenges a persistent assumption in project management culture: that decisive, directive leadership is the appropriate default posture for project environments. The evidence suggests otherwise. The relational infrastructure that servant leaders build before disruption arrives (the trust that surfaces problems early, the empowerment that sustains judgment under pressure, the stewardship that converts delivery into adoption) is precisely what makes directive intervention, when necessary, both faster and more effective. Servant leadership is not the alternative to decisive leadership; it is the foundation that makes decisive leadership credible.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This paper applies an intentionally practice-oriented methodology, synthesizing established theoretical frameworks with practitioner case examples rather than presenting primary empirical data. The case examples are drawn from the author's experience across enterprise transformation environments and are illustrative rather than representative. Future research employing quantitative methods to test the relationship between LMX quality, servant leadership behaviors, and project outcome variables (particularly adoption velocity and post-delivery value realization) would strengthen the empirical foundation for the arguments presented here.

Additionally, this paper focuses on the project manager as the unit of analysis for relational leadership. In practice, relational quality within project environments is shaped by organizational culture, executive sponsor behavior, and governance design, as well as by the PM's individual practice. Research examining how organizational-level factors moderate the relationship between PM relational leadership behaviors and project outcomes would contribute meaningfully to both the academic literature and practitioner guidance.

CONCLUSION

Projects do not fail because of methodology. They fail because of relationships nobody was watching.

This paper has argued that relational leadership, operationalized through the diagnostic lens of Leader–Member Exchange theory and the strategic posture of servant leadership, is a primary determinant of project resilience and value delivery in complex environments. The technical competencies that define professional project management are necessary but insufficient in stakeholder-intensive, adaptive, and transformational work. The gap between delivery and value

is a relational gap, and it is closed not through process improvement but through intentional relationship investment.

LMX theory gives project managers the vocabulary to name what they already observe: that relationship quality predicts information flow, engagement quality, and adaptive capacity under disruption. Servant leadership gives them the behavioral framework to build the relational infrastructure those outcomes require: through obstacle removal, active listening, empowered decision-making, transparent communication, and genuine stakeholder stewardship.

The practical tools presented here (the Relationship Risk Assessment and the Servant Leadership Behavior Inventory) are designed to make these theoretical constructs immediately actionable for working practitioners. They do not require organizational transformation or new governance structures. They require a deliberate shift in what project managers pay attention to, what questions they ask in project reviews, and what they treat as delivery-critical risk.

In an era of increasing project complexity, hybrid delivery models, and organizational transformation at scale, the project manager who can build high-quality relationships, across teams, across stakeholder groups, and across the full arc of the project lifecycle, is not a specialist. That is the practitioner the profession needs as its standard.

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About the Author

Jennifer F. Jones

Texas, USA

Jennifer F. Jones, PMP, PgMP, DASM is an IT Enterprise Services Director and transformational strategy leader with more than two decades of experience driving enterprise-wide modernization, governance, and organizational change. She has led large-scale digital and cloud transformations, established enterprise PMOs, and partnered with executive leaders to deliver complex ERP, compliance, and risk initiatives across regulated and matrixed environments. A credentialed project management professional holding the PMP®, PgMP®, and Disciplined Agile® Senior Scrum Master (DASM) certifications, Jennifer is recognized for bridging traditional, agile, and hybrid delivery approaches to improve stakeholder alignment, execution discipline, and business outcomes. Her leadership spans program and portfolio management, enterprise governance, risk and compliance, and change leadership, with a strong emphasis on relational leadership and organizational resilience. She holds an MBA in Strategic Leadership and is currently a Doctor of Business Administration candidate, with research interests focused on leadership effectiveness, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive project environments.

Jennifer can be contacted via LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/jjonespgmp/