

The Invisible Project Manager: Power, Legitimacy, and Informal Governance in Complex Projects

Understanding How Projects Are Really Governed Beyond Formal Structures¹

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Abstract

Project governance is commonly represented through formal structures of authority, accountability, and decision-making. Project sponsors, steering committees, project managers, and defined stakeholder groups are assumed to constitute the principal architecture through which projects are directed and controlled. Yet complex projects frequently operate through a second, less visible governance system composed of informal influence, political relationships, expert authority, resource dependency, social legitimacy, and information networks. This article introduces the concept of the Invisible Project Manager to examine actors who exercise significant influence over project trajectories without necessarily possessing formal project-management authority. Drawing conceptually on theories of organizational power, stakeholder salience, resource dependence, social networks, institutional legitimacy, and informal organization, the article distinguishes formal project governance from the relational structures through which decisions are negotiated, delayed, redirected, legitimized, or resisted. Six sources of invisible project authority are examined: positional proximity, resource control, expertise, network centrality, information control, and legitimacy. The article subsequently develops an Invisible Governance Map for identifying the actors and relationships that shape project decisions beyond organizational charts. It argues that complex projects are governed through a dual architecture: constitutional governance, which specifies formal roles and procedures, and relational governance, which determines how influence actually travels through the project ecosystem. The analysis suggests that project managers must understand not only who is formally responsible for a project but also who possesses the practical capacity to influence whether decisions become organizational realities. The article concludes with implications for stakeholder analysis, ethics, project leadership, governance design, risk management, and project-management education.

Key Words: project governance; power; legitimacy; informal organization; stakeholder influence; resource dependence; networks; project leadership; complex projects

¹ How to cite this work: Harake, M.F. (2026). The Invisible Project Manager: Power, Legitimacy, and Informal Governance in Complex Projects, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XV, Issue IX, September.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Formal Representation of Project Governance

Project management has developed a sophisticated architecture for assigning responsibility and coordinating collective action. Contemporary standards and governance frameworks distinguish the roles of sponsors, steering committees, project managers, workstream leaders, project management offices, clients, suppliers, and other stakeholders. Such arrangements are indispensable because projects are temporary organizations that require explicit mechanisms for authority, accountability, resource allocation, escalation, and control (Turner & Müller, 2003; PMI, 2021).

The formal governance model rests on a reasonable assumption: those who are assigned responsibility for the project should possess the authority required to direct it. A sponsor authorizes and champions the initiative, a steering committee resolves strategic issues, and a project manager integrates planning and execution. Responsibility matrices, reporting lines, approval thresholds, and governance charters make this architecture visible. They establish who is expected to decide, who must be consulted, and who is accountable for outcomes.

Yet formal representation is not the same as organizational reality. In many projects, an individual with no formal project title can delay a critical approval, redirect a technical choice, mobilize opposition, unlock resources, shape executive interpretation, or determine whether stakeholders accept an outcome. Conversely, a formally senior actor may possess little practical influence because the project depends on knowledge, relationships, or resources controlled elsewhere. The visible chart therefore captures only one dimension of project governance (Granovetter, 1973).



Figure 01. The Evolution of Project Management

1.2. Authority and Influence Are Not Synonymous

Authority is institutionally assigned; influence is relationally produced. Formal authority derives from position, mandate, contract, or governance rules. Influence, by contrast, may derive from expertise, trust, access, reputation, resources, information, or the ability to mobilize other actors. The two frequently overlap, but they need not coincide. This distinction has long been recognized in organizational theory, where power is understood not simply as hierarchical command but as the capacity to shape decisions, behavior, interpretations, and access to valued resources (French & Raven, 1959; Pfeffer, 1993).

For project management, the distinction is consequential because projects are especially dependent on actors who sit outside the direct chain of command. Specialists may belong to functional departments. Regulators may remain external to the organization. Suppliers control technologies and delivery capacities. Community representatives can affect social acceptance. Donors and financiers may condition resources. Senior executives may intervene informally without joining the project governance structure. In matrix organizations, even team members may answer simultaneously to project and functional authorities.

Dimension	Formal Authority	Actual Influence
Source	Role, mandate, hierarchy, contract	Resources, expertise, networks, legitimacy, information
Visibility	Usually explicit and documented	Often implicit and relational
Direction	Primarily vertical	Vertical, horizontal, external, and networked
Stability	Relatively stable during a governance period	Can change rapidly as dependencies change
Project question	Who is authorized to decide?	Who can make a decision succeed, fail, or change?

Table 01. Formal Authority and Actual Influence in Projects

1.3. The Problem of Invisible Governance

This article uses the term invisible governance to describe the network of actors, dependencies, relationships, informal norms, and influence mechanisms through which project decisions are shaped beyond formally designated governance structures (Jones et al., 1997). Invisible does not mean secret, illegitimate, or unethical. Much informal coordination is necessary and productive. Experienced practitioners routinely rely on trust, professional reputation, personal relationships, tacit knowledge, and informal consultation to make formal systems work (Granovetter, 1973).

The problem arises when project governance analysis assumes that the formal system is the complete system. Such an assumption can produce blind spots. A stakeholder may be classified as low power because no formal authority is visible, even though that actor controls indispensable knowledge. A technically approved decision may fail because socially legitimate actors were excluded. A steering committee may endorse a change that cannot be implemented because a functional manager controls the required people. A project manager may appear accountable for a result while lacking control over the relationships on which the result depends.

1.4. Research Objective and Structure of the Article

The objective of this conceptual article is to explain how informal authority shapes project governance and to develop a practical framework for identifying actors who exercise significant influence beyond formal project structures. The central research question is: *How does informal authority shape project governance, and how can project managers identify and responsibly engage actors whose practical influence exceeds their formal project authority?*

The article proceeds through six complementary theoretical perspectives. It first examines formal project governance and its limitations. It then considers organizational power, legitimacy, resource dependence, informal networks, and information control as mechanisms through which invisible authority emerges. These perspectives are integrated into the concept of the Invisible Project Manager and an Invisible Governance Map. The final sections develop a dual-governance theory of projects and discuss implications for stakeholder analysis, leadership, ethics, risk management, organizational practice, and project-management education (Vecchio, 2007).

2. Formal Project Governance and Its Limits

2.1. Context

Governance provides the institutional architecture within which projects are authorized, directed, monitored, and held accountable. In project settings, governance clarifies decision rights, defines escalation pathways, establishes oversight, and links temporary project structures to the permanent organization. This architecture is especially important because projects concentrate resources and create temporary roles that may cut across established functional boundaries (Too & Weaver, 2014).

2.2. Governance as a System of Decision Rights

At its core, formal project governance answers four questions: who has authority, over what decisions, under what conditions, and with what accountability. A project charter authorizes activity; governance committees allocate decision rights; reporting systems make performance visible; and stage gates condition continuation on evidence. Formal governance is therefore constitutional in the sense that it specifies the rules by which legitimate project decisions should be made (Weick, 1995).

This constitutional function is indispensable. Without formal decision rights, projects can become arenas of unresolved ambiguity. However, constitutional rules cannot specify every interaction required for implementation. Formal governance establishes the legitimate pathway of decision, but it cannot guarantee that actors possess the knowledge, resources, cooperation, or social acceptance required to make the decision effective.

2.3. The Temporary Organization Problem

Projects create temporary organizations inside or across permanent organizations. This condition produces structural dependence. A project manager may coordinate work without owning the functional resources performing it. Team members may return to their departments after completion. Suppliers retain independent commercial interests. Regulators and communities remain outside the project hierarchy. The temporary organization must therefore borrow authority, resources, and legitimacy from a wider institutional environment (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995; Turner & Müller, 2003).

The temporary nature of projects also makes relationships unusually important. Because time is limited, project actors cannot always build complete formal arrangements for every contingency. Coordination frequently depends on prior relationships, professional norms, rapid negotiation, and informal access to decision makers. The more complex the project ecosystem, the greater the gap that may emerge between formally assigned authority and practically exercised influence.

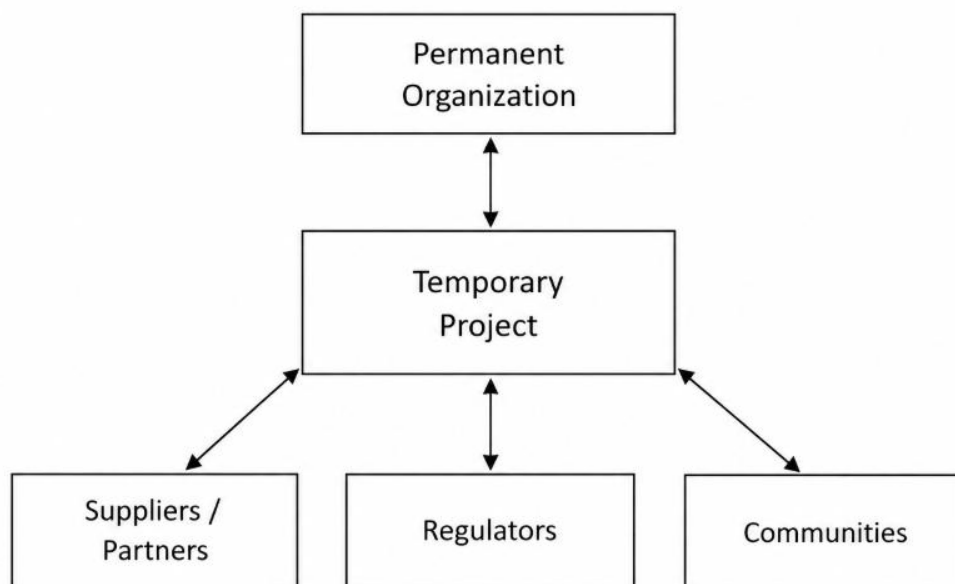


Figure 02. The Project as a Temporary Organization Embedded in Permanent Structures

2.4. The Limits of the Organizational Chart

Organizational charts are valuable because they simplify complexity. Their weakness is precisely the same: they simplify complexity. A chart represents formal reporting relationships but rarely displays who is trusted, who controls scarce expertise, who has privileged executive access, who acts as a broker between groups, who can mobilize resistance, or who defines the interpretation of ambiguous information.

Consequently, a project can be formally well governed and relationally fragile. All committees may exist, all roles may be documented, and all reports may be produced, yet decisions can still stall because the relational architecture has not been understood. Effective governance therefore requires a second map alongside the organizational chart: a map of influence.

Formal Governance Mechanism	What It Makes Visible	What It May Leave Invisible
Organization chart	Reporting relationships	Trust, informal access, network centrality
RACI / responsibility matrix	Assigned responsibility	Practical veto power and resource dependency
Steering committee	Formal strategic oversight	Pre-meeting coalitions and informal sponsors
Risk register	Recognized threats	Political and relational vulnerabilities
Stakeholder register	Identified actors	Hidden influencers and legitimacy networks
Status report	Reported performance	Filtering, framing, and information asymmetry

Table 02. Visible and Invisible Dimensions of Project Governance

3. Power in Project Environments

3.1. Context

Power is central to project governance because projects require coordinated action among actors with different interests, resources, expertise, and institutional positions. The classical bases-of-power framework distinguishes coercive, reward, legitimate, expert, and referent power (French & Raven, 1959). Later organizational research broadened the analysis by emphasizing control of uncertainty, resource dependencies, political behavior, and the strategic use of organizational structures (Pfeffer, 1993).

In project environments, power should not be treated as inherently negative. Power is the capacity to make coordinated action possible. A sponsor uses authority to protect priorities; an

expert uses knowledge to prevent technical error; a community leader may use legitimacy to secure acceptance; a functional manager uses resource control to ensure feasible staffing. Problems arise when power is ignored, concealed, abused, or misaligned with accountability.

3.2. Positional Power and Hierarchical Proximity

Positional power derives from formal office, but invisible influence can also derive from proximity to formal authority. An adviser, chief of staff, executive assistant, senior architect, or trusted colleague may possess no project decision right yet shape what senior decision makers hear, how issues are framed, and which concerns receive attention. Proximity creates influence by reducing the distance between information and authority.

This mechanism is especially important in projects involving senior executive sponsorship. Project managers may focus on the sponsor while overlooking the sponsor's interpretive network. Yet decisions are often socially prepared before they are formally made. Understanding who participates in that preparation can be as important as understanding who signs the decision.

3.3. Expert Power

Expert power emerges when a project depends on knowledge that is difficult to substitute. Complex projects routinely create such dependencies because technical, legal, financial, regulatory, cybersecurity, engineering, or contextual expertise is unevenly distributed. The formal project manager may integrate the project while relying heavily on specialists to define what is feasible.

Expert power becomes invisible when expertise is treated as merely advisory even though the project cannot realistically proceed against the expert's judgment. The expert may possess no formal veto, yet disagreement can function as a practical veto. This is not necessarily problematic; it may protect the project from unsound decisions. Governance becomes problematic when the effective decision right is hidden rather than acknowledged.

3.4. Resource Power

Projects depend on budgets, people, equipment, data, facilities, licenses, technologies, and external services. Actors who control these resources possess leverage because project action requires their cooperation. Resource dependence theory argues that organizations are shaped by their dependence on actors controlling critical resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). The same logic operates inside projects.

A functional director who controls scarce specialists may influence scope and schedule more strongly than the formal project manager. A supplier controlling a proprietary technology may shape technical choices. A donor may influence priorities through funding conditions. A regulator may control authorization. The decisive issue is not whether the actor appears above or below

the project manager on a chart, but whether the project can proceed without the resource that actor controls.

3.5. Relational and Referent Power

Some actors influence projects because others trust them, identify with them, or accept their judgment.



Figure 03. From Formal Authority to Practical Influence

Referent power is relational rather than contractual. It may derive from professional reputation, organizational history, credibility, cultural standing, or demonstrated integrity. Such influence can be especially important during ambiguity, when formal rules provide incomplete guidance and actors look to trusted individuals for interpretation.

Power Source	Mechanism	Typical Invisible Project Actor	Governance Risk if Ignored
Hierarchical proximity	Access to formal decision makers	Trusted adviser or executive intermediary	Issues are reframed before formal review
Expertise	Control of scarce knowledge	Technical specialist, legal counsel	Formal decisions prove infeasible
Resources	Control of critical inputs	Functional manager, supplier, donor	Implementation is delayed or conditioned
Relationships	Trust and identification	Veteran employee, informal leader	Team acceptance diverges from formal direction
Networks	Ability to mobilize others	Broker or coalition builder	Opposition or support spreads rapidly
Information	Control of visibility and interpretation	Gatekeeper, analyst, PMO intermediary	Decision makers act on filtered realities

Table 03. Sources of Power in Invisible Project Governance

4. Legitimacy: Why Some Actors Are Heard

4.1. Context

Power explains capacity, but it does not fully explain why some actors are listened to even when they lack resources or formal authority. Legitimacy concerns the generalized perception that an actor, action, or institution is appropriate, proper, or acceptable within a socially constructed system of norms and beliefs (Suchman, 1995). In stakeholder theory, legitimacy interacts with power and urgency to shape stakeholder salience (Mitchell et al., 1997).

4.2. Organizational and Professional Legitimacy

Organizational legitimacy may derive from long service, institutional memory, recognized contribution, or symbolic association with the organization's identity. Professional legitimacy derives from credentials, expertise, standards, or membership in respected communities of practice. An experienced engineer, physician, academic, architect, or public administrator may therefore exercise influence because stakeholders regard that person as entitled to speak authoritatively about a domain (Freeman, 1984).

4.3. Social and Political Legitimacy

Projects with significant public, territorial, environmental, or organizational consequences also depend on social legitimacy. Community representatives, employee delegates, professional associations, user groups, civil-society organizations, or local leaders may lack formal project authority while possessing the capacity to validate or contest the project's acceptability. In such settings, governance cannot be reduced to internal organizational authority.

Political legitimacy is similarly relevant when projects intersect with public policy, regulation, or institutional mandates. Formal approval may satisfy legal requirements without securing broader acceptance. Project managers who confuse authorization with legitimacy may discover that a technically compliant project remains socially or politically difficult to implement.

4.4. The Authority-Legitimacy Matrix

Formal Authority	Legitimacy	Actor Type	Likely Project Effect
High	High	Institutional governor	Strong capacity to decide and secure acceptance
High	Low	Vulnerable authority	Can decide formally but may face resistance
Low	High	Invisible governor	Can shape acceptance despite limited formal mandate
Low	Low	Peripheral actor	Limited current influence, though urgency may change this

Table 04. Authority–Legitimacy Matrix

The most analytically interesting category is the invisible governor: an actor with limited formal authority but high legitimacy. Such actors may determine whether a decision is accepted, interpreted as credible, or implemented cooperatively. Their influence is often underestimated because conventional governance tools privilege formal power over socially conferred authority.



Figure 04. The Legitimacy Pathway in Project Decisions

5. Resource Dependence and Project Influence

5.1. Projects as Dependent Systems

No complex project is self-sufficient. Projects depend on resources controlled by parent organizations, suppliers, regulators, clients, financiers, experts, and partner institutions. Resource dependence theory emphasizes that dependence creates power asymmetries because actors controlling scarce and important resources can condition the behavior of those who require them (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

The project manager's formal authority is therefore bounded by the project's dependency structure. A manager may be accountable for schedule performance while depending on a functional unit for staff, on procurement for contracting, on a supplier for a critical component, and on a regulator for approval. The governance chart may place the manager at the center, while the dependency network places the manager at the intersection of multiple external constraints (Powell, 1990).

5.2. Financial Dependence

Financial dependence is among the most visible forms of influence. Sponsors, investors, donors, budget owners, and lenders can shape project scope, timing, reporting, and priorities by conditioning access to funds. Yet the influence may extend beyond explicit contractual rights. Anticipation of future funding decisions can encourage project actors to align behavior with the perceived preferences of resource providers even before formal conditions are imposed.

5.3. Technical and Knowledge Dependence

Technical dependence arises when critical capabilities are concentrated in particular individuals or organizations. Proprietary platforms, specialist certifications, unique data, legacy-system knowledge, or scarce engineering competencies can make nominally subordinate actors structurally powerful. The project may have contractual alternatives in theory but no practical substitute within the required time or cost.

5.4. Regulatory and Political Dependence

Public and regulated projects depend on permissions, standards, inspections, licenses, and institutional cooperation. Regulatory actors may therefore possess decisive influence even when they are not part of project governance. Political actors can also shape the environment by changing priorities, authorizations, or public narratives. This does not imply improper interference; it reflects the institutional embeddedness of projects.

5.5. Dependency and Autonomy

A useful governance principle follows: the greater the project's dependence on an actor, the less meaningful it is to assess that actor only through formal authority. Dependency should be mapped directly. Project autonomy is not determined solely by the project manager's mandate but by the substitutability of critical resources and the concentration of control over them.

Dependency	Critical Resource	Potential Invisible Governor	Managerial Response
Financial	Budget / future funding	Budget owner, donor, investor	Clarify conditions and decision thresholds
Human resources	Scarce specialists	Functional manager	Negotiate capacity and escalation rights
Technical	Platform / proprietary know-how	Supplier or technical expert	Reduce single-point dependency
Regulatory	License / approval	Regulator	Engage early and document requirements
Informational	Data / access	Data owner or gatekeeper	Create transparent access protocols
Social	Acceptance / cooperation	Community or workforce leader	Build legitimacy before implementation

Table 05. Resource Dependencies and Invisible Influence

6. Informal Networks and Shadow Governance

6.1. Formal Organization and Informal Organization

Organizations have always contained both formal and informal structures. Formal structures define roles; informal structures emerge through interaction. Projects intensify this duality because they assemble people across functions, organizations, professions, and jurisdictions for limited periods. The project network therefore contains relationships that are not captured by formal reporting lines but are essential to coordination.

6.2. Network Centrality

Social network analysis demonstrates that influence can depend on an actor's position within a network rather than hierarchical rank. Highly central actors interact with many others and can accelerate the diffusion of information. Actors occupying brokerage positions connect otherwise

separated groups and can control or facilitate flows between them (Burt, 1992). In projects, such actors often become indispensable translators across technical, managerial, and stakeholder communities.

A broker may have a modest title but extraordinary practical importance. The person who understands both the engineering team and the client organization, or who can translate between headquarters and a local implementation context, can shape the meaning of information as it crosses boundaries. Brokerage therefore creates both value and vulnerability: the project benefits from integration but becomes dependent on a relational bridge.

6.3. Gatekeepers

Gatekeepers influence what enters or leaves a decision environment. They may control access to senior executives, filter technical information, manage stakeholder communications, or determine which issues reach formal governance forums. Gatekeeping is unavoidable because decision makers cannot process unlimited information. The governance challenge is to ensure that filtering improves relevance without distorting reality.

6.4. Coalitions and the Shadow Steering Committee

Complex decisions are often negotiated before formal meetings. Actors test proposals, build support, resolve objections, and seek assurances in advance. This process can create what may be called a shadow steering committee: not a literal secret committee, but the informal constellation of actors whose support is practically necessary for a formal decision to survive implementation.

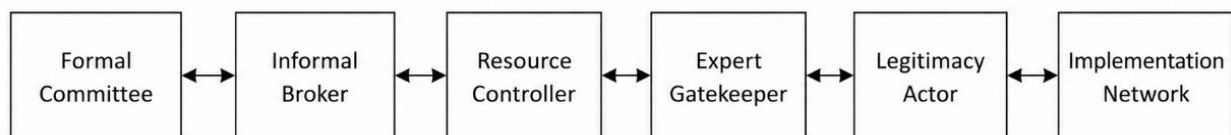


Figure 05. Formal and Shadow Governance

The existence of such a network is not inherently dysfunctional. Pre-coordination can reduce conflict and improve decision quality. However, shadow governance becomes problematic when it excludes legitimate stakeholders, obscures accountability, or allows private interests to override formal governance. Project leadership must therefore distinguish constructive informal coordination from opaque capture.

Network Role	Primary Function	Value to Project	Potential Risk
Central connector	Links many actors	Rapid coordination	Overdependence on one person
Broker	Connects separated groups	Translation and integration	Selective mediation
Gatekeeper	Filters access or information	Reduces overload	Distortion or exclusion
Coalition builder	Mobilizes support	Creates alignment	Political polarization
Boundary spanner	Works across organizations	Cross-institutional coordination	Role ambiguity
Informal leader	Shapes group norms	Builds commitment	Can mobilize resistance

Table 06. Informal Network Roles in Complex Projects

7. Information Control and Interpretive Power

7.1. Context

Projects are governed through information. Schedules, forecasts, risk reports, dashboards, business cases, technical analyses, stakeholder feedback, and lessons learned make the project visible to decision makers. Yet information is never a perfect mirror of reality. It is selected, categorized, summarized, interpreted, and communicated. Actors who influence these processes possess interpretive power.

7.2. Information Asymmetry

Information asymmetry exists when one actor knows something that another actor needs but cannot independently verify. Projects generate asymmetry because knowledge is distributed across specialists, suppliers, clients, and organizational levels. Senior governance bodies depend on summaries; project managers depend on workstream reports; clients depend on technical explanations. This creates opportunities for both productive expertise and strategic filtering.

7.3. Framing and Agenda Setting

Influence can occur before a decision is made by shaping how the decision is defined. A schedule issue framed as a technical delay may invite a technical response; framed as a contractual failure, it may trigger escalation; framed as a strategic opportunity, it may justify redesign. The underlying facts may overlap, but the frame influences which options appear legitimate.

Agenda setting is equally important. What is omitted from a governance meeting may be as consequential as what is included. The actor who determines which risks are escalated, which

indicators appear on a dashboard, or which stakeholder concerns are summarized can influence decision attention without possessing formal decision rights.

7.4. Transparency and Countervailing Mechanisms

Because information control can create invisible power, governance systems should include countervailing mechanisms.

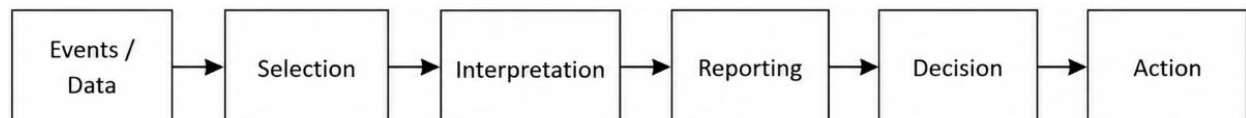


Figure 06. Information as a Governance Process

These include direct access to source data where appropriate, independent assurance, dissent channels, triangulation of evidence, explicit assumptions, and opportunities for affected stakeholders to challenge interpretations. Transparency does not mean overwhelming decision makers with raw information; it means making the logic of selection and interpretation sufficiently visible to support accountability.

Information Mechanism	Invisible Influence	Governance Safeguard
Selection	Determines what becomes visible	Clear escalation criteria
Aggregation	Can hide variation and outliers	Access to disaggregated evidence
Framing	Shapes interpretation of the issue	Alternative scenarios and challenge
Timing	Can accelerate or delay attention	Defined reporting cadence and exceptions
Access	Creates privileged knowledge	Role-based but auditable access
Expert translation	Makes complexity understandable	Independent review for critical claims

Table 07. Information Control and Governance Safeguards

8. The Invisible Project Manager

8.1. Defining the Concept

The preceding sections suggest that project influence emerges through multiple mechanisms that are only partially captured by formal governance. This article therefore defines an Invisible Project Manager as an actor who exercises sustained and consequential influence over project direction, resources, decisions, stakeholder behavior, interpretation, or legitimacy without holding corresponding formal project-management authority.

The term manager is used functionally rather than occupationally. The Invisible Project Manager may not manage the project in an administrative sense. Rather, the actor performs a governance effect: shaping what the project can do, what others believe it should do, or whether formal decisions become executable. The concept is therefore intended as an analytical lens, not a new job title.

8.2. Six Sources of Invisible Authority

Six recurring sources of invisible authority can be synthesized from the theoretical perspectives discussed above: positional proximity, resource control, expertise, network centrality, information control, and legitimacy. These sources can reinforce one another. An expert who is also trusted by senior executives and central in the project network may possess extraordinary influence despite limited formal authority.

Source of Invisible Authority	Core Question	Observable Indicator	Possible Project Effect
Positional proximity	Who has access to formal authority?	Frequent direct contact with sponsor/executives	Shapes interpretation before formal decisions
Resource control	Who controls what the project needs?	Budget, staff, technology, approvals	Conditions feasibility and timing
Expertise	Whose knowledge is difficult to substitute?	Specialist reliance, unique know-how	Defines feasible options
Network centrality	Who connects critical groups?	High interaction / brokerage	Mobilizes coordination or resistance
Information control	Who determines what others know?	Reporting, gatekeeping, data ownership	Shapes attention and framing
Legitimacy	Whose acceptance matters to others?	Trust, reputation, social standing	Validates or contests decisions

Table 08. Six Sources of Invisible Project Authority

8.3. The Invisible Governance Map

Traditional stakeholder matrices frequently classify actors by power and interest. This remains useful but can obscure the mechanisms through which power is produced. The Invisible Governance Map extends stakeholder analysis by assessing six dimensions separately: formal authority, actual influence, resource control, information control, network centrality, and legitimacy. A seventh contextual variable, urgency, can be added where stakeholder claims change rapidly (Mitchell et al., 1997).

The purpose of the map is diagnostic rather than political. It helps the project manager identify mismatches between accountability and influence, single points of dependency, overlooked legitimacy actors, and hidden communication bottlenecks. The map should be updated because invisible governance is dynamic. An actor may become influential when a project enters a regulatory phase, encounters a technical crisis, or requires community acceptance.

Dimension	Low	Medium	High
Formal authority	No project decision right	Advisory / delegated role	Explicit decision or veto right
Actual influence	Rarely changes outcomes	Influences selected decisions	Consistently changes project direction
Resource control	Resources substitutable	Partial dependency	Critical resource not readily substitutable
Information control	Open access	Some filtering role	Controls critical information flow
Network centrality	Peripheral	Connected within one cluster	Broker across multiple critical groups
Legitimacy	Limited recognition	Recognized by some stakeholders	Broadly trusted / socially authoritative

Table 09. Invisible Governance Map – Assessment Dimensions

8.4. A Typology of Project Governors

The distinction between formal authority and actual influence makes it possible to identify different types of actors involved in project governance. While some governors derive their influence from officially assigned roles, others shape project decisions through expertise, resources, information, networks, or legitimacy. A typology of project governors therefore provides a more realistic representation of how authority and influence are distributed within complex projects. It also helps project managers recognize actors whose practical importance may not be immediately visible within formal governance structures.

Type	Formal Authority	Actual Influence	Defining Characteristic
Formal governor	High	High	Authority and influence are aligned
Ceremonial governor	High	Low	Formal role exceeds practical influence
Invisible governor	Low	High	Influence exceeds formal authority
Gatekeeper	Low–Medium	Medium–High	Controls access or information
Broker	Low–Medium	High	Connects actors who otherwise remain separated
Latent governor	Low	Currently low	Can gain influence rapidly if conditions change

Table 10. Typology of Project Governors

8.5. The Ethical Boundary

Recognizing invisible governance must not become an argument for bypassing formal accountability. Informal influence can improve coordination, but it can also enable favoritism, manipulation, exclusion, corruption, or capture. The project manager's task is therefore not to exploit hidden power indiscriminately but to understand it and, where possible, bring consequential influence into transparent and accountable governance processes.

A practical ethical test is to ask whether an informal mechanism could be explained to legitimate stakeholders without undermining trust. Informal consultation that improves understanding may pass this test; concealed side agreements that override formal commitments may not. The goal is relational intelligence with institutional integrity.

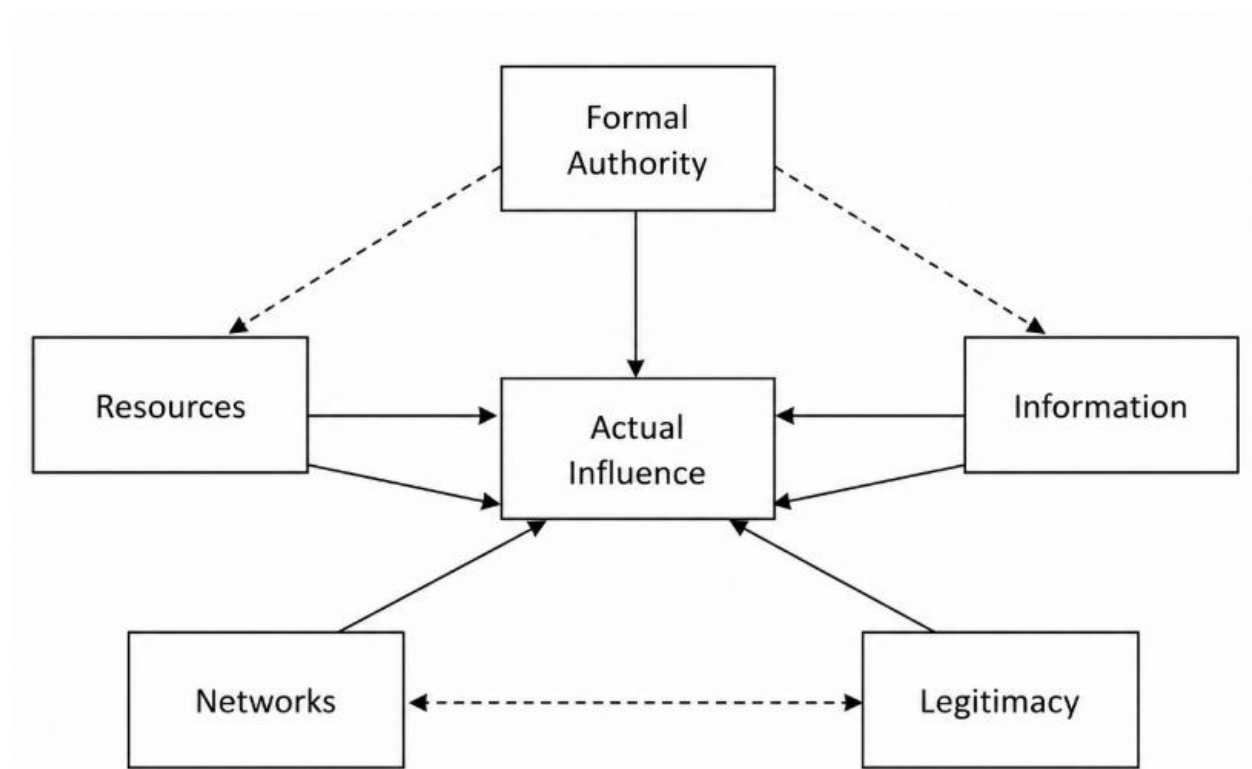


Figure 07. The Invisible Governance Map

9. Integrating Formal and Informal Governance: A Dual-Governance Theory of Projects

9.1. Context

The analysis developed in this article suggests that complex projects operate through two overlapping governance systems. The first is constitutional project governance: the visible system of roles, committees, decision rights, contracts, procedures, and accountability. The second is relational project governance: the network of trust, dependence, expertise, legitimacy, information, and informal influence through which formal decisions acquire practical effect.

9.2. Constitutional Project Governance

Constitutional governance establishes legitimacy through explicit rules. It answers who is authorized to act and how accountability is assigned. Its strengths are clarity, traceability, consistency, and formal responsibility. Its weakness is incompleteness: no governance charter can anticipate every dependency or relationship that will shape a complex project.

9.3. Relational Project Governance

Relational governance establishes practical capacity through cooperation and influence. It answers who must support, interpret, resource, translate, or accept a decision for it to become effective. Its strengths are flexibility, contextual intelligence, trust, and rapid coordination. Its weakness is opacity: if relational governance becomes detached from accountability, it can undermine fairness and institutional legitimacy.

Governance System	Primary Basis	Strength	Principal Risk
Constitutional governance	Roles, rules, contracts, committees	Accountability and clarity	Rigidity or incomplete representation
Relational governance	Trust, resources, networks, legitimacy	Adaptation and practical coordination	Opacity or capture

Table 11. The Two Governance Systems of Complex Projects

9.4. Governance Alignment

Project governance is strongest when constitutional and relational systems are aligned. Formal decision makers should have access to the expertise and information required for sound judgment. Actors controlling critical resources should be incorporated into realistic planning. Legitimate stakeholder voices should be represented in appropriate forums. Informal brokers should support rather than substitute for accountable governance.

Constitutional Strength	Relational Strength	Governance Condition	Likely Outcome
High	High	Aligned governance	Legitimate and executable decisions
High	Low	Formalistic governance	Decisions approved but weakly implemented
Low	High	Shadow-dominant governance	Effective coordination with accountability risk
Low	Low	Fragmented governance	Ambiguity, delay, conflict, and drift

Table 12. Dual-Governance Alignment Matrix

Misalignment creates predictable pathologies. When formal authority is high but relational support is low, decisions may be legitimate yet unimplementable. When relational influence is high but formal accountability is low, decisions may be effective yet opaque. When both are

weak, the project becomes fragmented. When both are strong and aligned, governance combines legitimacy with execution capacity.

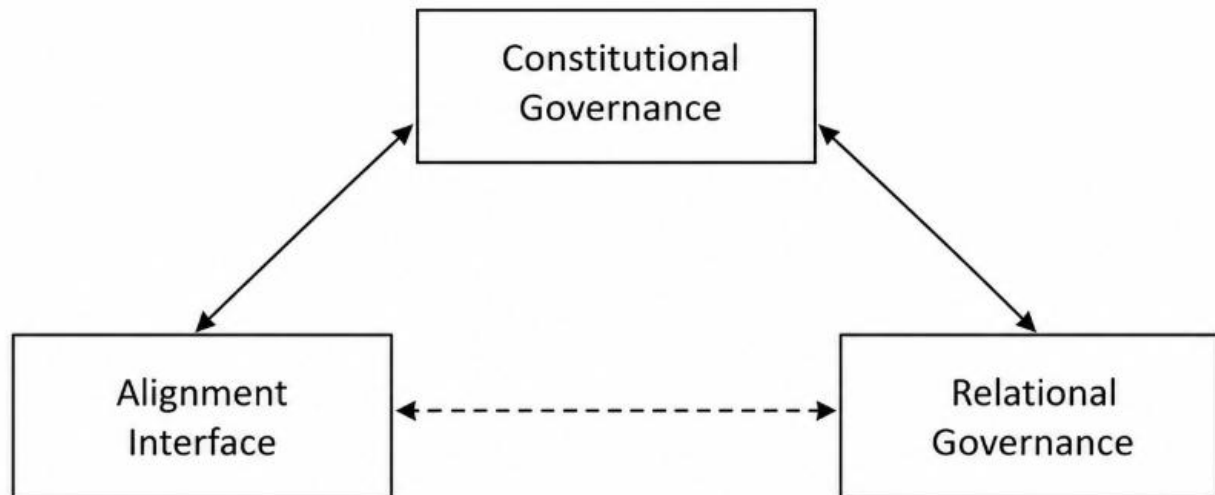


Figure 08. Dual Governance in Complex Projects

9.5. Project Management as Governance Across Boundaries

This dual perspective reframes the project manager's role. Project management is not only the coordination of tasks within a temporary organization; it is also the governance of interdependence across boundaries. The project manager must work vertically with formal authority, horizontally across functions, externally across institutional boundaries, and relationally through networks of influence.

This does not diminish the importance of planning, scheduling, cost control, risk management, or formal governance. It explains why these tools sometimes fail despite technical correctness. A plan is executable only if the social and institutional system required to enact it is aligned. The project manager therefore needs both procedural competence and governance intelligence.

10. Implications for Project Management Practice

10.1. Implications for Stakeholder Analysis

Stakeholder analysis should move beyond the question "Who has power and interest?" toward a more diagnostic set of questions: *Who controls resources? Who possesses non-substitutable expertise? Who filters information? Who is trusted? Who connects otherwise separated groups? Who can confer or withdraw legitimacy? Who can make implementation easier or impossible?*

This expanded analysis does not require excessive complexity. For major projects, the Invisible Governance Map can be reviewed at key transitions: initiation, design approval, procurement, implementation, major change, crisis, and closure. The purpose is to detect shifts in influence before they surprise formal governance.

10.2. Implications for Risk Management

Invisible governance creates a category of relational risk that is often distributed across conventional risk registers. Examples include dependence on a single expert, unrecognized stakeholder veto capacity, informal information bottlenecks, sponsor-access asymmetry, coalition resistance, and legitimacy deficits. Treating these as governance risks makes them visible without reducing relationships to threats.

10.3. Implications for Communication

Communication plans should distinguish between formal reporting and relational communication. Formal reports preserve accountability; relational communication builds interpretation and commitment. A project can communicate extensively yet remain poorly connected if information reaches formal recipients but not the actors who shape implementation. Conversely, excessive reliance on informal communication can create inequity and undocumented commitments. Effective communication requires both channels.

10.4. Implications for Leadership

The dual-governance perspective suggests that effective project leadership involves four directions of work. Leaders manage upward by maintaining sponsor confidence and escalation quality; downward by enabling teams; laterally by negotiating across functions; and outward by engaging external stakeholders and institutional environments. Invisible governance adds a fifth dimension: leaders must understand how influence moves among these directions (Vecchio, 2007).

Political skill in this sense should not be confused with manipulation. It refers to accurate social perception, relationship building, contextual judgment, and the ability to align diverse interests around legitimate project objectives (Weick, 1995). Such capability is especially important where project managers possess responsibility without complete hierarchical control.

10.5. Implications for Ethics and Accountability

A mature governance approach makes consequential informal influence discussable. When a supposedly advisory actor effectively possesses veto power, governance should recognize the reality and clarify accountability. When a community's acceptance is essential, engagement should be substantive rather than symbolic. When a broker becomes indispensable, knowledge and relationships should be distributed to reduce vulnerability.

Ethical governance therefore requires two forms of transparency: transparency of decision rights and transparency of dependency. Stakeholders should understand not only who formally decides but also which constraints and dependencies materially shape the decision. This is particularly important in public, humanitarian, infrastructure, and institutionally complex projects where legitimacy extends beyond the contracting organization.

10.6. Implications for Project Management Education

Project-management education traditionally emphasizes scope, schedule, cost, risk, quality, procurement, and stakeholder engagement. These remain essential. However, practitioners operating in matrixed and multi-organizational environments also need competencies in organizational power, network analysis, negotiation, institutional legitimacy, resource dependence, and ethical governance.

Teaching these subjects can help future project managers distinguish political awareness from political opportunism. Students should learn to map influence without normalizing opaque practices, to negotiate dependencies without surrendering accountability, and to use informal relationships in ways that reinforce rather than circumvent legitimate governance.

Educational Area	Traditional Emphasis	Expanded Governance Competency
Stakeholders	Power / interest classification	Legitimacy, networks, dependency, hidden influence
Leadership	Team direction and motivation	Boundary spanning and relational influence
Governance	Roles and committees	Alignment of formal and informal systems
Risk	Technical and delivery uncertainty	Relational and legitimacy risk
Communication	Plans and reporting	Framing, gatekeeping, and network diffusion
Ethics	Codes and compliance	Accountability for informal influence

Table 13. Educational Implications of Invisible Project Governance

11.A Practical Diagnostic Framework for Project Leaders

11.1. Step 01 – Map the Constitutional Structure

Begin with the formal system. Identify sponsors, governance committees, decision rights, escalation thresholds, contractual authorities, functional ownership, and external approvals. This provides the accountability baseline against which relational influence can be compared.

11.2. Step 02 – Map Critical Dependencies

Identify resources without which the project cannot progress: funding, people, data, technology, approvals, knowledge, access, and social acceptance. For each dependency, identify who controls it, how substitutable it is, and how quickly alternatives could be mobilized.

11.3. Step 03 – Identify Influence Networks

Ask who is consulted before important decisions, who connects disconnected groups, who is trusted when information is ambiguous, and who can mobilize support or resistance. Interviews, observation, communication patterns, and stakeholder workshops can reveal relationships that formal documentation does not show.

11.4. Step 04 – Assess Legitimacy and Information Control

Identify actors whose approval may not be legally required but whose acceptance is practically significant. At the same time, identify information gatekeepers: those who control data, access, reporting, interpretation, or escalation. This step often reveals why apparently rational decisions encounter unexpected resistance.

11.5. Step 05 – Compare Influence with Accountability

The central diagnostic question is where influence and accountability diverge. High influence with low accountability indicates an invisible governor and may justify stronger transparency or formal inclusion. High accountability with low influence indicates a vulnerable formal role and may require resource, authority, or relationship reinforcement.

11.6. Step 06 – Design Ethical Engagement

The response to invisible governance should not automatically be formalization.

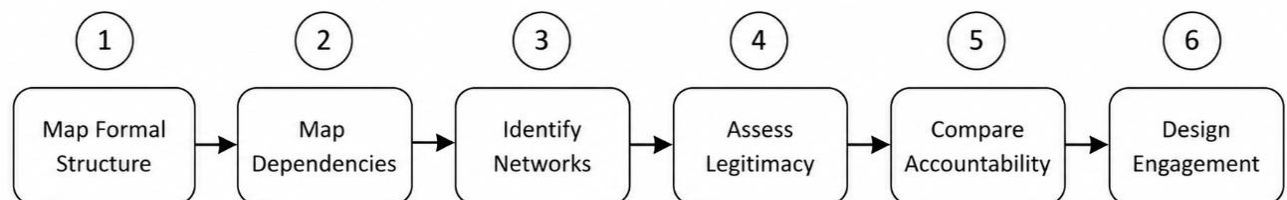


Figure 09. Six-Step Invisible Governance Diagnostic

Some informal relationships are valuable precisely because they remain flexible. The appropriate response may be consultation, broader representation, shared information, dependency reduction, independent assurance, or clearer escalation. The objective is alignment, not bureaucratization.

Diagnostic Question	Evidence to Seek	Possible Action
Who formally decides?	Charters, contracts, governance terms	Clarify decision rights
Who can block implementation?	Dependencies, approvals, resource ownership	Engage or reduce dependency
Who is trusted?	Consultation patterns, stakeholder feedback	Include legitimate voices
Who controls information?	Reporting flows, data access	Create challenge and transparency mechanisms
Who connects critical groups?	Communication and coordination patterns	Support boundary-spanning roles
Where does influence exceed accountability?	Comparison of formal and relational maps	Rebalance governance or assurance

Table 14. Practical Questions for Invisible Governance Analysis

12. Discussion

12.1. Theoretical Contribution

The theoretical contribution of this article does not rest on the claim that informal influence is a previously unidentified organizational phenomenon. Organizational research has long demonstrated that power, legitimacy, resource dependence, network position, expertise, and information asymmetries can shape organizational action beyond formally assigned authority. Project research has similarly recognized the importance of stakeholders, temporary organizations, interorganizational relationships, and governance arrangements. The

contribution developed here lies instead in bringing these previously dispersed insights into a project-specific governance framework centered on the systematic divergence between formal authority and actual influence.

The concept of the Invisible Project Manager provides an analytical construct for examining this divergence. Rather than treating influential actors primarily as stakeholders to be identified and managed, the framework considers the possibility that some actors become part of the project's effective governance architecture. They may shape which alternatives are feasible, which issues reach decision makers, which resources become available, how decisions are interpreted, and whether formally authorized actions obtain sufficient organizational or social support to be implemented. In this sense, influence is not merely an attribute affecting stakeholder salience; under certain conditions, it becomes a governance mechanism.

This perspective extends stakeholder salience by shifting the analytical question from who deserves managerial attention to who participates, formally or informally, in determining project outcomes. It complements resource-dependence theory by locating critical dependencies within the governance architecture of temporary projects; network perspectives by connecting brokerage and centrality to project decision processes; and legitimacy perspectives by examining how socially conferred authority can affect the implementation of formally authorized decisions. These theoretical traditions therefore provide foundations for the proposed framework, but none alone captures the combined governance effect produced by their interaction.

The article integrates these mechanisms through six dimensions of invisible authority: positional proximity, resource control, expertise, network centrality, information control, and legitimacy. Their integration into the Invisible Governance Map constitutes a second contribution by translating otherwise dispersed sources of influence into a common diagnostic architecture. The map makes it possible to compare formal authority with actual influence and to identify situations in which consequential governance capacity exists without corresponding formal accountability.

A third contribution is the distinction between constitutional and relational project governance. Constitutional governance specifies who is formally authorized to decide through roles, procedures, contracts, committees, and accountability arrangements. Relational governance concerns the network of resources, expertise, information, trust, legitimacy, and relationships through which those decisions become feasible, accepted, and executable. The distinction does not position informal governance as an alternative to formal governance. Rather, it proposes that project outcomes depend partly on the degree of alignment between these two governance architectures.

The theoretical novelty of the framework therefore lies primarily in integration, project-specific conceptualization, and analytical operationalization, rather than in claiming discovery of the individual mechanisms from which invisible influence originates. By conceptualizing actors whose practical influence exceeds their formal authority as participants in an effective governance architecture, the article moves the analysis from informal influence as an organizational condition toward invisible governance as a project-governance problem.

12.2. From Stakeholder Salience to Governance Architecture

Stakeholder salience theory explains why managers prioritize certain stakeholders based on power, legitimacy, and urgency (Mitchell et al., 1997). The present framework extends this logic by asking how those attributes become embedded in governance. A salient stakeholder does not merely demand attention; that stakeholder may function as part of the project's effective decision architecture.

This shift is important because engagement and governance are not identical. A stakeholder can be extensively engaged yet still exercise invisible veto power. Conversely, an actor can sit on a committee yet remain practically peripheral. Governance analysis therefore benefits from examining the architecture of influence rather than relying solely on stakeholder categories.

12.3. Informality as Both Capability and Risk

A second contribution is the refusal to treat informality as either inherently beneficial or inherently dysfunctional. Informal governance can create speed, trust, contextual intelligence, and cross-boundary coordination. It can also create opacity, exclusion, dependence, and unaccountable power. The relevant question is whether informal mechanisms complement legitimate governance or displace it.

12.4. Limitations and Future Research

This article is conceptual and therefore does not empirically test the Invisible Governance Map. Future research could examine the framework through comparative case studies of infrastructure projects, digital transformations, humanitarian interventions, public-sector reforms, university projects, or international development programs. Social network analysis could be combined with interviews and formal governance documents to compare visible and relational structures.

Quantitative research could operationalize the six dimensions of invisible authority and test whether misalignment between formal authority and actual influence predicts delay, conflict, escalation, or stakeholder resistance. Longitudinal research could examine how invisible governance changes across project phases. Ethical research could investigate when informal influence supports coordination and when it becomes governance capture.

The concept may also be useful in studying artificial intelligence and digital project environments. As algorithmic systems increasingly filter information, recommend priorities, and shape managerial attention, future research may need to ask whether influence can be exercised not only by human invisible governors but also by socio-technical systems that structure what decision makers see.

13.Conclusion

Project management is commonly represented through visible structures: sponsors, steering committees, project managers, teams, contracts, plans, and reporting systems. These structures are essential because they establish authority and accountability. Yet they do not fully explain how complex projects are actually governed.

Projects also operate through a relational architecture composed of resource dependencies, expertise, networks, legitimacy, information flows, trust, and informal influence. Actors positioned within this architecture can shape project direction without holding corresponding formal authority. This article has described such actors through the concept of the Invisible Project Manager and has proposed six sources of invisible authority: positional proximity, resource control, expertise, network centrality, information control, and legitimacy.

The analysis leads to a dual-governance theory of projects. Constitutional governance defines who should decide; relational governance influences whether decisions can be implemented, accepted, and sustained. Neither system is sufficient alone. Formal governance without relational understanding can become rigid and ineffective. Relational governance without formal accountability can become opaque and ethically vulnerable. Effective project leadership requires alignment between the two.

The practical implication is straightforward but demanding: project managers must learn to manage the project they can see and understand the governance system they cannot immediately see. This requires more than political awareness. It requires disciplined analysis of dependencies, networks, legitimacy, information, and accountability, combined with an ethical commitment to transparency and institutional integrity.

The most influential person in a project is not necessarily the project manager, sponsor, or steering committee chair. Sometimes the actor who most profoundly shapes the project does not appear anywhere on its organizational chart. Understanding that invisible architecture may be one of the most important (and least formally recognized) competencies of project leadership.

Disclosure of AI and Digital Tools Used

This manuscript was finalized with the assistance of standard digital and AI-enabled tools used for routine text preparation. No AI system was used to generate, expand, or create the conceptual, theoretical, or analytical contributions of the paper, which remain entirely the author's own work.

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