Reimagining Project Management for a New Era

Culture Is Not Soft. It Is a Filing System.[1]

Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez[2]

Everyone quotes the line about culture eating strategy for breakfast.

Everyone nods. Nothing changes.

The phrase has lasted decades because it is unfalsifiable and free. It tells you culture matters. It does not tell you what culture is. So anyone can agree with it. At any level. At no cost.

Let me propose something narrower.

In projects, culture is not a mood. It is certainly not the quality of the coffee.

It is the answer to one mechanical question.

Can true information about a project reach the person with authority faster than the project can fail?

Every organisation has an answer. It can be traced.

Trace it, and culture stops being an atmosphere. It becomes plumbing, with identifiable joints where the contents get lost.

A Tuesday in March

Let me walk one piece of bad news through a company.

This is from a European medical devices firm. Spring of 2023. The programme was regulatory, and it finished eleven months late.

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[2] Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez is the author of *Powered by Projects: Leading Your Organization in the Transformation Age* (HBR Press, Jan 2026) and *The HBR Project Management Handbook (HBR 2021). One of the world's most popular authors and speakers on the topic of the Project Economy and the Future of Project Management, he is Founder of Projects & Co. , a PMI Fellow & Former Chairman and Thinkers50 Award Winner. Learn more in his author profile at the end of this article.*

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On a Tuesday in March, a test engineer found a fault. A data migration routine was dropping records. Nobody had specified the condition that caused it.

She put the rework at seven to nine weeks.

None of what follows is unusual. That's why I am telling it.

The first gate is whether she says anything.

She had joined fourteen months earlier. The CEO had committed publicly to a regulatory date. In January, a colleague had raised a scheduling concern. He was told, not unkindly, that the team needed solutions, not problems.

She watched that happen.

Researchers have a name for what happens next. The mum effect: the documented reluctance to pass undesirable news upward.[3]

She raised it with her team lead instead of the program forum.

That is the most common outcome. It is not cowardice. It is a rational read of what she had already seen.

The second gate is what happens in writing.

Her team lead believed her. He also had a status report due Thursday. It carried a red-amber-green field.

Seven to nine weeks of rework in a stretched workstream meant red. Red triggers an escalation meeting. Then a remediation plan. Then a fortnight of scrutiny. He could not absorb that and fix the fault.

So he wrote amber. Underneath it he wrote one truthful sentence. A technical issue, under investigation.

Nothing there was false. Nobody lied at this gate.

This is where most of the information goes.

The third gate is aggregation.

[3] On the "mum effect" and the "deaf effect" in project reporting see Mark Keil and colleagues; Keil, Smith, Iacovou and Thompson, "The Pitfalls of Project Status Reporting," *MIT Sloan Management Review*.

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The PMO took in forty-one workstream reports that week. It produced a summary. One amber line with a technical note does not survive a summary.

It became a bullet in an appendix.

The fourth gate is whether anyone hears it.

At the steering committee the programme was broadly on track. Issues under management.

The appendix was not opened.

Researchers call this one the deaf effect. Decision-makers discount bad news about projects they are committed to. News can survive three gates and still be waved through.

The rework was confirmed in July. By then it was five months. The dropped records had spread into two downstream systems.

Nobody in that chain behaved badly.

That is what makes it culture, not conduct.

Every Gate Failed at Once

The public version is the Post Office Horizon scandal. It is the most serious project failure of my professional lifetime.

Between 1999 and 2015, authorities prosecuted and convicted around 736 British sub-postmasters. The evidence came from the Horizon accounting system.[4]

The convictions were wrong. The system had faults.

Thirteen people took their own lives, most probably as a consequence of what was done to them.

Sir Wyn Williams reported in July 2025. On the first generation of the system he found that employees of the Post Office, senior and not so senior, knew or at the very least should have known that Legacy Horizon was capable of error.[5]

The same held at Fujitsu, and for the system that followed.

Through all of it, in the inquiry's words, the Post Office maintained the fiction that its data was always accurate.

[4] Post Office Horizon IT Inquiry, Volume 1, Sir Wyn Williams, July 2025.
[5] Post Office Horizon IT Inquiry, Volume 1, July 2025, as reported in *The Register*, 8 July 2025.

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Read the four gates against that sentence.

The information existed. People held it. It did not travel. Where it travelled, it was not heard. The public position stayed the opposite of what its own people knew.

Sir Wyn also found the compensation schemes badly delayed. He doubted the unresolved cases could be settled any time soon.

Volume two of the inquiry, on accountability, is expected this year.

This is heavier than a management column usually carries. I thought about leaving it out. I have kept it. The sanitised examples are exactly why this conversation stays decorative.

The mechanism that destroyed those lives produces an amber line on a Thursday. Scale differs. Kind does not.

We Have Started to Measure It by Accident

One figure in this year's Wellington report has stayed with me.

Fifty-two percent of organizations say they have a track record of project success.[6]

Thirty-six percent say they mostly or always deliver the full benefits.

Same survey. Same respondents. Same organizations.

Belief runs sixteen points ahead of delivery, and nobody was lying. They answered two questions that sit on opposite sides of a gate.

An industry survey measured, by accident, what everyone says cannot be measured.

What to Call It

I would call this the Candour Gap. The distance between what an organization knows and what it can say out loud.

It follows the Judgment Gap I described in July. Judgment is worthless when the inputs were laundered on the way up.

An executive exercising fine judgment on a green report decides confidently. About a situation that does not exist.

[6] Wellingtone, *The State of Project Management 2026*, published March 2026.

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It also explains why the Decision Gap gets misdiagnosed as slowness.

Organisations are not always slow. Sometimes they decide fast, and well. On information four gates have already corrected into something reassuring.

The Thing That Is About to Change

Culture has always escaped accountability by being unmeasurable.

That defence is closing.

A system now reads the repository. The ticket flow. The test results. The meeting transcripts. If that week's report says green, the distance stops being interpretation.

It becomes a number.

Not the warmth of the culture. Not its values. The size of the gap between what it knew and what it wrote down.

Most companies are nowhere near this. The ones who get there first will find it uncomfortable.

And the number will be contested. Somebody will argue that the system misread the context. That the amber was defensible. That the engineer's estimate was only ever an estimate.

They may even be right. The argument itself will be new.

The first honest measurement in a large company will not be small.

One more thing is worth saying about that number. It will not be a verdict on anyone's character, and it should not be presented as one, because every gate in the chain was staffed by people doing what their organisation had taught them to do.

Worth deciding now whether you want to know.

Five Questions for Reflection

- In our last three troubled projects, how long did the organisation know before the steering committee was told?
- What happens, concretely, to the person who turns a line red?
- Which of our four gates loses the most information, and how would we find out?
- When did a sponsor last change a decision because of bad news, rather than absorbing it and pressing on?
- If we could measure the distance between what our teams know and what our reports say, would we want the number?

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Final Reflection: The Report Is Not the Project

Every organisation I work with believes it wants the truth.

Most have built a system that filters it out first. Nobody meant to.

The filtering is not done by bad people. It is done by ordinary people. They respond sensibly to what they have watched get rewarded and punished.

A team lead who writes amber instead of red is not corrupt. He is reading his organisation correctly.

Which is why the interventions aimed at culture so rarely work.

A workshop does not change what happens to the person who writes red. Nor does a values poster decide whether the appendix gets opened.

Culture in projects is not built out of beliefs. It is built out of what predictably happens next.

That is a design question, not a moral one.

Change what happens to the person carrying bad news, and the reports change by the end of the quarter.

Leave it alone, and you will go on receiving excellent information about a project that is not the one you are running.

See you in December.

References

Post Office Horizon Inquiry findings and the "fiction that its data was always accurate": Sir Wyn Williams, Post Office Horizon IT Inquiry, Volume 1, July 2025, reported in The Register, 8 July 2025.

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About the Author



Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez

Madrid, Spain

Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez, PMI Fellow, is one of the **world's leading experts in Project Management and Strategy Implementation**. He is the author of the "*Harvard Business Review Project Management Handbook* " (HBR 2021) and is the **most published author on project management matters in Harvard Business Review**. His upcoming book, *Powered by Projects: Leading Your Organization in the Transformation Age*, will be published by Harvard Business Review Press in early 2026.

Antonio has brought Project Management to the center of executive leadership, positioning it as a critical capability for transformation in the next decade. He is the creator of influential concepts such as the **Project Economy®**, the **Hierarchy of Purpose®**, and the **Project-Driven Organization™**, which argue that *projects have become the operating system of modern organizations—and the language of future careers*.

His global impact on management and leadership has been recognized by Thinkers50, where he is **the only project management thinker included twice in a row** in the ranking of the world's most influential management thinkers. He is also the recipient of the prestigious **Thinkers50 Ideas Into Practice Award** and a member of the **Marshall Goldsmith 100 Coaches** community.

He was the global Chairman of the Project Management Institute in 2016 and has been recognized as a Fellow of PMI for his contribution to the project management profession. He led the creation of the Brightline Initiative, founded Projects & Co, and co-founded the Strategy Implementation Institute.

His work focuses on advising senior leaders on prioritizing and implementing strategic initiatives and leading transformational change.

Antonio is also the author of "Lead Successful Projects" (Penguin, 2019), "The Project Revolution" (LID, 2019). and "The Focused Organization" (Taylor & Francis, 2014), and has contributed to seven other books. A pioneer and leading authority in teaching and coaching senior executives the art and science of strategy execution and project management. Currently visiting professor at Duke CE, Instituto de Empresa, Solvay, Vlerick, Ecole des Ponts, and Skolkovo.

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He is a much-in-demand speaker at events worldwide. Antonio has presented at more than 800 conferences around the world and is regularly ranked the best speaker. European Business Summit, Strategy Leaders Forum, Gartner Summit, TEDx, and EU Cohesion Policy Conference; are some of the events he has delivered inspirational keynotes.

He is former Sustainability Program Director and Head of Global Program Management Office at GlaxoSmithKline Vaccines. Previously he also served as Head of Project Portfolio Management at BNP Paribas Fortis and Head of Post-Merger Integration at Fortis Bank, leading the acquisition of ABN AMBRO, the largest in financial service history. He also worked for ten years at PricewaterhouseCoopers, becoming the global lead practitioner for project and change management.

Born in Madrid, Spain, and educated in Germany, Mexico, Italy, and the United States, Antonio is fluent in five languages. He is an Economist, has an MBA from London Business School and Insead's IDP. You can follow Antonio through his LinkedIn Newsletter - Lead Projects Successfully. For more information, visit his website at www.antonionietorodriguez.com. He can be reached via email: antonio.nieto.rodriguez@gmail.com

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