Structured Problem-Framing as a Leadership Skill in Complex Projects[1]

Flavio Soriano

Complex projects have an annoying habit of refusing to stay as neat as they looked at kickoff.

The problem statement gets approved. The plan is built. Workstreams start moving. Then reality joins the project.

A dependency nobody considered becomes critical. A stakeholder changes priorities. New evidence contradicts an early assumption. Operating conditions shift while delivery is already underway.

The dangerous part is that the team can keep executing anyway.

In my experience, this happens because delivery pressure rewards movement.

Sponsors want progress. Business-as-usual work does not politely disappear because a transformation programme has started. Teams already have preferred solutions. So the original problem definition gets intense attention for a few days, perhaps a few weeks, and then quietly becomes background.

Everyone is busy solving the problem.

Fewer people are checking whether it is still the right problem.

That is where structured problem framing becomes a leadership discipline rather than a kickoff exercise. A useful frame keeps five things visible:

- how different stakeholders interpret the problem;
- where the current system boundary sits;
- which causal explanations the team is testing;
- which assumptions carry the greatest consequence; and
- what evidence should trigger a formal review of the frame.

The objective is simple: keep the project solving the problem that current evidence supports, not the one everybody agreed six months ago was probably the problem.

Why Structured Problem Framing Matters in Complex Projects

Not all complexity looks the same.

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Geraldi, Maylor and Williams (2011) describe dimensions including structural complexity, uncertainty, dynamics, pace and socio-political complexity. Atkinson, Crawford and Ward (2006) show that project uncertainty also extends beyond discrete risk events into ambiguity, incomplete information, stakeholder characteristics, changing agendas, and tensions around trust and control.

That distinction matters.

A technically complicated project can contain hundreds of components and still have a reasonably stable diagnosis. A programme with shifting objectives, interdependent decisions and competing stakeholder interests creates a very different framing problem.

A project problem statement directs attention. Once leaders say, "This is the problem," the team immediately starts narrowing its field of view:

- What evidence should we investigate?
- Which causes look plausible?
- What sits inside the analysis?
- Which stakeholders need to participate?
- Which solutions deserve serious consideration?

That narrowing is necessary. A project team cannot investigate every possible explanation forever.

The trouble starts when yesterday's choices become today's facts.

Imagine a programme framed around weak user adoption. The diagnosis sounds reasonable, so the response follows naturally: more training, better communication, tighter adoption tracking.

There is only one problem.

What if users are not the main problem?

If the stronger drivers are unclear process ownership, slow decisions, poor data governance or conflicting local requirements, the team can execute the adoption plan beautifully and still pour resources into the wrong mechanism.

Excellent execution does not rescue a weak diagnosis. It just gets you to the wrong destination faster.

Complexity also needs precise language

The term wicked problem deserves some restraint.

Rittel and Webber (1973) developed the concept for problems whose definition itself is contested and whose solutions resist simple right-or-wrong evaluation. Many difficult projects are complex without meeting that standard.

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Project leaders do not need dramatic terminology.

They need a better question:

- Has the project become uncertain or interdependent enough that the original frame needs active testing?

Problem Framing in Project Management Is Leadership Work

Problem framing in project management does not end when somebody approves the charter.

The frame keeps influencing what gets measured, which risks attract attention, who gets invited into the conversation and which interventions receive funding.

That makes the choices behind the frame leadership decisions:

- **Boundary:** What belongs inside the problem now?
- **Evidence:** What is strong enough to influence action?
- **Stakeholders:** Who holds information, authority, exposure, or a competing interpretation?
- **Causality:** Which explanation best accounts for the pattern we are seeing?
- **Review:** What new evidence is significant enough to reopen the frame?
- **Governance:** Who has authority to approve the consequences of changing it?

Someone has to own those choices.

That is the project leadership work.

The problem owner needs enough structure to stop the team wandering in every possible direction, while keeping the reasoning open enough to be challenged when the evidence changes.

In structured problem solving, diagnostic work needs to happen before the organisation commits heavily to a solution. Delivery pressure naturally compresses that work. Everyone wants to get moving.

Understandable.

But starting quickly is not especially impressive if three months later the team discovers it was solving the wrong problem.

Five Practices for a Working Project Problem Statement

1. Gather Stakeholder Interpretations

Complex projects rarely look the same from every seat around the table.

The sponsor sees delivery slippage.

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Users see duplicate work.

Operations sees broken hand-offs.

Finance sees unreliable data.

A supplier sees design decisions that nobody has made.

Those are not inconvenient opinions to eliminate on the way to stakeholder alignment. They are evidence.

Before trying to make everyone agree, document where their interpretations differ and why.

For each stakeholder, capture:

- what they believe is happening;
- the evidence they can directly observe;
- the outcome or exposure shaping their view; and
- the authority they hold.

This stops the loudest person in the meeting from accidentally becoming the root-cause methodology.

2. Set a Provisional System Boundary

Every frame draws a line around the system being examined.

That line matters because it determines what the team can see.

Take a weak system-adoption programme. A narrow boundary might include training, communication, user behaviour and adoption metrics.

A wider one might include process ownership, master data, approval rights, incentives, local requirements and operating-model decisions.

The team should record:

- what sits inside the current analysis;
- what currently sits outside it;
- the time horizon;
- major interfaces and dependencies;
- the level of analysis; and
- excluded areas that deserve monitoring.

The word provisional matters.

The boundary makes the analysis manageable. It should not become a wall that prevents the team noticing evidence outside it.

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If a supposedly external dependency starts determining project outcomes, the answer is not, “Technically, that is out of scope.”

The frame may need to move.

3. Turn Explanations Into Causal Hypotheses

Project teams regularly use descriptions that sound suspiciously like causes:

- “Engagement is low.”
- “Users are resistant.”
- “Delivery is inefficient.”

They describe what is visible. They do not explain why it is happening.

A causal hypothesis goes further:

- Slow approval decisions are creating rework, which is lowering engagement and encouraging teams to bypass the intended process.

Now the team has something it can test.

Good root cause analysis asks:

- What mechanism would produce the outcome we see?
- What evidence should exist if this explanation is correct?
- What evidence would weaken it?
- Which competing explanation could produce the same symptom?
- Are we looking at a driver, an enabling condition or a downstream effect?

Hypothesis-led work creates focus.

It can also create tunnel vision surprisingly quickly.

Once a smart team becomes attached to an elegant explanation, evidence has an unfortunate tendency to be interpreted very generously. That is why teams should test competing hypotheses and actively look for disconfirming evidence before committing major resources.

4. Track Material Assumptions and Evidence

Every complex project contains assumptions.

Some are obvious because they appear in the business case. Others hide inside schedules, requirements, resource plans, benefit forecasts and stakeholder strategies.

The useful question is not, “What assumptions do we have?”

There will be plenty.

Ask:

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- **Which assumptions would materially change the project if they proved wrong?**

Put those in a lightweight evidence register. For each one, record the current evidence, confidence level, owner, validation action and consequence if it fails.

For example:

- **Training will resolve adoption issues:** Completion is high, but errors remain high. Compare workflow error patterns before deciding whether process or system design needs review.
- **Local teams can use the global template:** Unresolved country exceptions should trigger requirements validation before rollout continues.
- **Data ownership is clear:** Repeated defects without accountable owners should trigger a governance and operating-model review.

The register earns its place when it changes what the team investigates or decides.

Otherwise, congratulations: you have created another spreadsheet.

5. Define Reframe Triggers

A project problem statement becomes dangerous when everyone knows how to approve it but nobody knows what would justify changing it.

Define reframe triggers early.

Useful triggers include:

- material evidence contradicting the current causal hypothesis;
- a stakeholder objective changing;
- a new dependency appearing outside the current boundary;
- expected benefits deteriorating;
- a critical assumption failing;
- the same symptom returning after repeated intervention; or
- delivery teams repeatedly creating workarounds around the designed process.

A trigger should open a structured review, not an uncontrolled debate about whether the entire project should start again.

Give the review a named owner, a time box, evidence requirements and a clear governance consequence.

A useful sequence is:

- Evidence → trigger → owner → bounded review → revised frame → control decision

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Structured problem framing sits at the front end of a broader structured problem-solving framework that continues through decomposition, hypothesis testing, evidence review, option development and prioritisation.

How Framing Connects to Project Governance and Controls

Changing the frame and then continuing with the same controls makes little sense.

Project governance is what turns new understanding into controlled decisions.

Control area	What framing helps test	Possible response
Business case and benefits	Does the stated need still match the evidence?	Revisit benefit assumptions, measures or owners
Scope and requirements	Does the boundary exclude important interfaces?	Review scope, requirements or change requests
Risk and issues	Are causal assumptions missing from the current risk picture?	Add risks, owners or escalation thresholds
Stakeholders	Do different interpretations reveal decision gaps or hidden exposure?	Adjust engagement, decision rights or escalation
Schedule and dependencies	Do delays point to coordination, sequencing or capacity problems?	Revisit dependencies, milestones or recovery actions
Governance and change control	Does new evidence weaken the logic behind the approved course?	Reopen the relevant decision through formal governance

In complex project management, a revised frame should change the controls that depend on it.

That does not mean every new piece of evidence becomes an excuse for scope expansion.

Disciplined reframing needs boundaries too. Start with evidence. Name an owner. Time-box the review. Record what changed, why it changed, and which baselines or controls now need adjustment.

The project is allowed to learn.

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It is not allowed to forget accountability while doing so.

Illustrative Scenario: When an Adoption Problem Changes Shape

Consider an illustrative multinational programme replacing separate finance, procurement and inventory systems with one enterprise platform across three countries.

The programme is behind plan.

Pilot users bypass the new workflow. Data errors remain high. Local teams keep requesting exceptions.

The original project problem statement is wonderfully simple:

Users are resisting the new system.

That frame produces a perfectly logical response: more training, stronger communication and tighter adoption monitoring.

Then the evidence becomes inconvenient.

Stage	What the team learns	Management response
Initial frame	Weak adoption is attributed to user resistance	Increase training, communication and adoption tracking
Stakeholder interpretations	Users report duplicate work; finance reports inconsistent master data; local leaders cite unresolved country requirements; the vendor cites delayed design decisions	Record competing explanations
Boundary test	Evidence points beyond user behaviour toward process ownership, data governance and decision rights	Expand the working boundary selectively
Causal hypotheses	Training, data ownership, decision latency and local design fit become testable explanations	Assign evidence tests and owners
New evidence	Trained teams show the same error pattern; defects cluster around records with unclear ownership; country exceptions wait for central decisions	Reduce confidence in the resistance hypothesis

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Revised frame	Slow cross-country decisions and weak master-data ownership are driving rework and workarounds	Revise governance, ownership, sequencing, risks and rollout criteria

Once the frame changes, the programme has to change with it.

Decision rights need clarification. Data ownership needs an owner rather than a box on an organisation chart. Country exceptions need a defined approval path. Rollout sequencing, risks and stakeholder plans can then be revisited using the stronger diagnosis.

Notice what happened here.

The original explanation was not foolish. It was reasonable based on the evidence available at the time.

Later evidence weakened it.

Good leadership is not pretending the first diagnosis was perfect. It is changing the response when the evidence says you should.

Limits and Safeguards

Structured problem framing takes time and attention. Using the full machinery for every minor project decision would be a fine way to ensure nobody ever wants to frame another problem again.

Depth should match the consequence and uncertainty of the decision.

Several safeguards help:

- **Time cost:** Stakeholder interviews, evidence reviews and causal analysis consume scarce project capacity. Match the effort to the importance and uncertainty of the decision.
- **Power dynamics:** Formal authority can dominate the frame. Preserve dissent and create routes for people close to operational reality to contribute evidence.
- **Hypothesis bias:** Early explanations shape what teams look for. Require competing hypotheses and disconfirming evidence.
- **False consensus:** Agreement can reflect hierarchy, fatigue or political pressure rather than genuine alignment. Record unresolved tensions when they still matter to the decision.
- **Over-analysis:** There is always more evidence available. Use time boxes and explicit decision thresholds.

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- **Specialist assurance:** A stronger frame does not replace technical analysis, pilots, legal review, domain expertise or independent assurance when the decision requires them.

Causal conclusions still need appropriate evidence and specialist validation.

Framing does not magically make the evidence true.

It improves the logic guiding what the team investigates, how it governs the work and what it does next.

Conclusion

The real test of structured problem framing is not whether a project began with a good problem statement.

It is whether that problem statement can survive contact with reality.

Strong frames make stakeholder interpretations, boundaries, causal hypotheses, material assumptions and review triggers visible. When evidence changes, project leaders can revise the frame through a controlled process and carry the consequences into scope, risk, benefits, sequencing, stakeholder decisions and governance.

Complex projects will keep producing uncertainty. That part is not going away.

The leadership question is simpler:

Can the team explain what it currently believes, what evidence supports that view, and what would make it change its mind?

If it cannot, the project may still be moving.

The more important question is where.

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Flavio Soriano is an entrepreneur, educator, and former management consultant who spent five years at Arthur D. Little and McKinsey & Company. He has founded five businesses and trained more than 10,000 professionals in consulting-grade problem-solving, communication, and career development. As founder of High Bridge Academy, he leads a global faculty of 60+ former McKinsey, Bain, and BCG consultants, helping professionals and teams strengthen structured thinking, executive communication, stakeholder management, and the practical use of AI at work.

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