

Leading change in a disrupted world

Because when projects
succeed, society benefits

Introduction

Geopolitics, economic shocks, and global risks are redefining how leaders build adaptive capacity into their organisations. But what separates those who flounder from those who adapt?

The complexities of the modern world are evolving from the well-known VUCA model (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) and are being increasingly described as brittle, anxious, non-linear and incomprehensible. This is significant because it considers the internal, psychological impact of change, not just external factors. Modern leadership is also based on the internal: adaptability, creativity and – crucially – being human. All of these qualities are essential to leading change.

This paper is based on conversations that took place at the Association for Project Management (APM) Project Summit at Windsor Castle in autumn 2025. Senior project experts, leaders and C-Suite-level executives attended to share ideas and examine challenging topics in new and creative ways.



Contributors

This paper is based on insights shared at APM's Windsor Project Summit. The discussion was led by:

Professor Eddie Obeng PhD, MBA



Eddie is a professor at the School of Entrepreneurship and Innovation at the Henley Business School, founder and Learning Director of Pentacle, The Virtual Business School, and a leading business theorist, innovator and educator.

Alistair Godbold, APM Vice President and Director at The Nichols Group



Alistair is an experienced programme director with over 40 years' experience managing and advising companies on major projects and programmes. He has worked on projects ranging from construction, urban regeneration, IT, defence, rail, nuclear and aviation in the UK and internationally. He is a regular speaker and thought leader on developments and good practice in project delivery.

Alistair has also served as a Director of APM and the Major Projects Association. He is a Fellow of the Institute of Engineering and Technology, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and a Fellow of the International Centre for Complex Project Management, in addition to being an Honorary Fellow of APM and the International Project Management Association. He is also a Director of the Global Alliance for the Project Professions. He is a Chartered Engineer and a Chartered Project Professional.

Professor Stephen Carver, Senior Lecturer at Cranfield School of Management



Stephen is rated as one of the top three lecturers at one of Europe's top MBA Business Schools. He has a reputation for taking complex management concepts such as project, programme and crisis management and being able to distil them down into highly informative and fun lectures – often using storytelling techniques. His attitude is "if you haven't done it, you shouldn't be teaching it."

He has spent most of his working life in business and has worked with many organisations globally across all sectors. He has taught worldwide and appeared regularly on national radio, TV and YouTube.

Brigadier (Rtd) Sara Sharkey CBE, Strategy Director at Prolinx



Sara served in the British Army for 30 years where, recognising the dominance of data, applications and cloud for military strategic advantage, she spearheaded the transformation of Army information services to agile software development practices and shared data services. Prior to joining Prolinx, a UK Sovereign Cloud SME based in Wiltshire, Sara was a Director at Deloitte leading their Digital in Defence account, supporting digital transformation spanning Artificial Intelligence to re-imagining cloud migration for clients.

Sara supported the formation of the Royal Signals Inspiring Women in Technology Forum and, as a mother of daughters, is an ardent advocate for supporting the recruitment and retention of women in STEM roles. She is the Digital Governor at Cirencester College and Trustee of the Royal Signals Charity.

Finding consistency in a changing world

Half of business leaders now update their strategies at least three times a year. This reflects the world in which we now live, with an accelerating pace of change that requires constant adaptability.

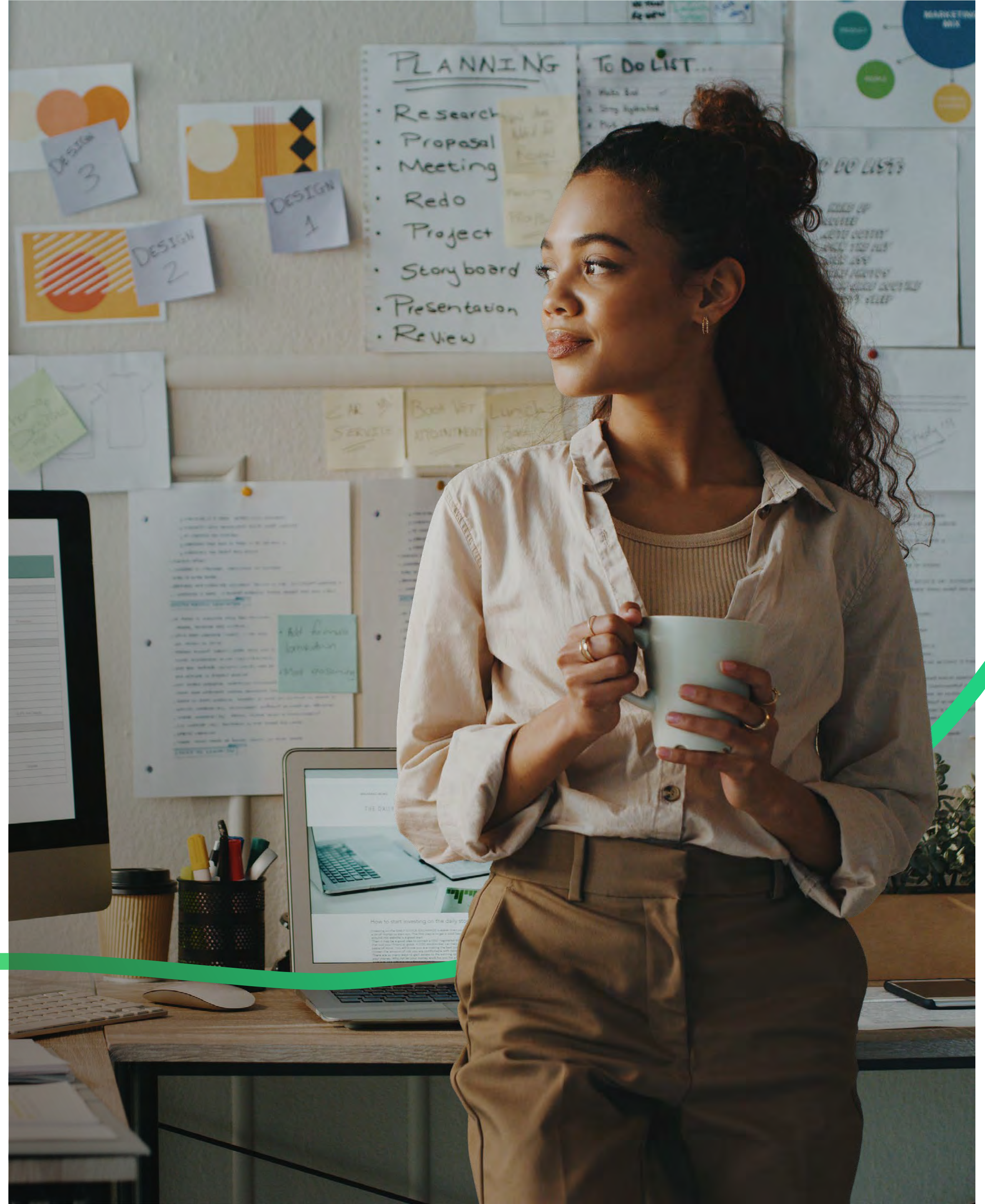
Change is, of course, necessary for success. Often, it *is* success. But continuous change also brings risk: uncertainty, resistance, client impacts and more. Clarity and stability in the midst of change are vital to achieving strategic goals. Stability and clarity can stem from consistent vision and values, but these must be leveraged to shape outcomes.

Vision and values should feed into the following aspects of project delivery:

Purpose

Is there a strong vision for the project and how it fits into a bigger picture? Or is there a clear link between the project's success criteria and benefit to end users? If not, find ways to connect the project team's work and the outcomes to inject purpose into people's work; something that aligns with your organisation's values, or the client's.

Also, consider if the project will leave a legacy. This is possible on all projects to some extent, even if its benefits haven't been fully realised, because you can still share the experience and knowledge with others to help future projects succeed.



Finding consistency in a changing world (continued)

Planning

Alongside the technical aspects of project planning and delivery that need to be addressed, the people aspects are critical. Leaders must spend time shaping what they're doing, but also how, why and with whom.

As a minimum, vision and values should influence the following elements of a project plan:

Outcomes	What is it we're trying to achieve in our complex world? What is truly needed?
Stakeholder engagement	Leaders must understand the wider context of the project, oversee engagement with stakeholders to create the vision, and adapt their approach to changing situations and project phases. Leaders therefore need to know their own strengths and weaknesses, to build teams that complement and mitigate respectively.
Deliverables	What tangible items are needed to ensure the desired outcomes are achieved and the vision is realised?
Communication	Who needs to be kept informed about the project and its progress? What, why, when and how do they need to know? Don't rely only on reporting, as this is one-way and passive. Seek opportunities for two-way engagement, tailor messages to people's preferences and focus on building relationships rather than just transmitting information.
Conflict resolution	At some stage of a project, there is invariably some level of conflict. This may be between the different stakeholders, with suppliers or within the team itself. Not all conflict is bad, as it allows issues to be voiced. Anticipating conflict is an important first step to management, negotiation and creative resolution.



Finding consistency in a changing world (continued)

Governance

- Good governance adapts to its environment. Leadership teams need to be diverse thinkers and have a broad skillset, to navigate unexpected problems.
 - This must be based on structures that emphasise pace (to enable quick decision-making) and curiosity (to unlock uncertainties and complexities). In this way, leadership will better understand the context of the operational environment and be more adaptive to challenges associated with strategic transformation.
 - Balance selecting the same governance teams for consistency with variance to avoiding 'groupthink' creeping in.
- Good governance enables but doesn't restrict. Governance should employ controls and define limits to empower project leaders to make decisions and manage risk effectively.
- Good governance is psychologically safe but not soft. Enable people to put forward ideas, share feedback, take risks and learn from mistakes without fear of repercussions. This must be balanced with accountability, however (see the section 'Don't Fear Failure' for more guidance on this point).

Qualified and capable people

Research by APM has found only 34% of businesses have dedicated project specialists. Furthermore, nearly half of business leaders (45%) feel it's "not at all important" for people working on projects, programmes and portfolios to be professionally certified.

While many non-project specialists have skills that lend themselves to project management (organisation, communication, attention to detail, etc), it should be remembered that project management is a chartered profession. People need to be qualified for what they do.

It's important to recognise competence and ability, as well as credentials. Qualifications alone do not guarantee capability. Many organisations value continuing professional development (CPD). Where hiring for experience isn't an option, support CPD through mentoring, coaching, professional memberships and encouraging independent learning.

"To lead in this world, we need to be empathetic, resilient, adaptive and – the thing that sets us out as different – we have to be human. It's people that deliver projects."

Alistair Godbold

Don't fear failure

The word 'failure' has negative connotations, but there is value in it too. Professor Stephen Carver argued that a silver lining of failure is that it drives innovation, explaining: "One thing we need above all is innovation. That means we've got to have permission to fail. In most organisations, you don't get that. They say it, but when something goes wrong, they look at who they're going to blame."

Prof Carver cited two examples of failure that, from necessity, yielded innovation:

- **Apollo 13, described by NASA as 'the successful failure'.** An explosion aboard Apollo 13 on 13 April 1970 transformed the planned lunar landing into a rescue mission. Plans had to be changed rapidly, with new measures improvised to ensure the three-man crew could return safely, which they did on 17 April. Following a detailed review, NASA announced that future Apollo command and service modules would be modified so as "to enhance their potential use in an emergency mode."
- **The 2009 Hudson River plane crash, dubbed 'the miracle on the Hudson'.** On 15 January 2009 a plane carrying over 150 people took off from LaGuardia Airport, New York City. Shortly after "take off", it collided with a flock of birds, severely damaging both engines. Unable to reach any nearby airport, Captain Chesley Sullenberger III guided the plane to a risky landing on the Hudson River. There were no fatalities. The incident highlighted the value of the crew's training. It also resulted in several technical lessons learned, plus 34 new safety recommendations from the National Transportation Safety Board.



The following measures will ensure positive outcomes can be salvaged from failed projects:

- Banish blame culture by creating trust. Leaders need accurate and timely information – good and bad – if they're to make appropriate decisions. Organisations with a blame culture will have few people willing to share bad news, admit errors or voice dissenting views.
 - Build trusted internal networks that comprise reliable sources of information that can be called upon when needed.
 - Role model risk-taking behaviours and accountability. Share positive outcomes but admit mistakes (and show that mistakes don't automatically result in punishment).
 - Demonstrate calm leadership. Manage optimism bias and pessimism bias among colleagues by helping them understand and accept what can and can't be changed.
 - Set clear standards. People need to know what standards are required and when they aren't being met.
- Don't aspire to avoid conflict completely. Projects are fast paced, uncertain and bring together diverse groups with different priorities. This means conflict should be expected at least sometimes. Instead of trying to prevent or avoid conflict altogether, view it as a chance to surface tensions early, clarify expectations and move forward with greater alignment.
- View closed projects in their wider context. A closed project shouldn't be seen as a 'failure' in a conventional sense but as an opportunity for better use of resource. It isn't wrong to start something when the outcome is uncertain, but it is wrong to continue if new evidence shows that sufficient value can't be created.

"We need more leadership, less management in the wrong way, and certainly more failure."

Prof Stephen Carver

Adaptability and resilience in the digital world

Brigadier (Rtd) Sara Sharkey drew on her military experience to explain how to use data and digital technology to support adaptability, resilience and speed in a disrupted world.

Sara acknowledged there are significant differences and unique factors to military projects compared with civilian ones, but there are similarities that mean lessons from one sphere can be applied to the other, including guarding against emerging threats.

Secure by Design

Sara explained the importance of building security into everything from the start.

‘Secure by Design’ is an approach that puts cyber security at the heart of every stage of a capability’s life cycle. In the UK, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) is implementing Secure by Design in all top-level budgets and arm’s length bodies so that teams can meet evolving threats, making sure risks are proactively and proportionately mitigated. Just like any other business risk, capabilities must be continually assessed and managed in relation to their security risk. This is increasingly relevant in our highly connected world where a software glitch in one nation can impact critical government services in another and where the threat and success of cyber attacks fuelled by AI bad actors is growing exponentially.¹

Sara also urged project leaders to be highly attuned to the delivery of tangible value and to guard against blindly following instruction. She shared two abbreviations to summarise risks that arise from decision-making in the absence of adequate data:

- **‘HiPPO’ (highest paid person’s opinion)** – Without data to guide decision-making, groups often defer to the person with the most authority (i.e. the highest-paid person). Cognitive biases such as authority bias and the illusion of certainty may then prevent different views being shared, or even considered.
- **‘WAGI’ (‘what a good idea!’)** – Refers to deference to an idea expressed by someone else. This may be due to authority bias if the idea is expressed by a senior leader. But sometimes it can be due to a desire (subconscious or deliberate) to avoid accountability by following someone else’s idea.



¹ www.digital.mod.uk/policy-rules-standards-and-guidance/secure-by-design/what-is-sbd

Adaptability and resilience in the digital world (continued)



Integrate project delivery and the C-Suite

One way to guard against this is through leadership structure. Most military organisations now have a Chief Information Officer, to make sure representations can be made at board level. Smaller organisations may not warrant dedicated roles but an executive should hold responsibility and ensure that cyber and digital factors in project delivery are 'baked in' to the full business model.

The pace of technological change and opportunities for projects to leverage digital twins, AI and autonomy also demand a mindset shift:

- Be adaptable
- Pivot to accommodate innovation
- Learn through failing fast
- Ensure test and assurance keeps pace with digital development.

"A question we always ask in the military is 'has the situation changed?' You have to be able to adapt to changes and take necessary action without fear that you might miss a milestone or change a mission objective."

Brigadier (Rtd) Sara Sharkey

About APM

The Association for Project Management (APM) is a professional membership organisation that sets the standards for the project profession and raises its profile. APM is the only chartered organisation representing the project profession in the world. As a registered charity, APM delivers learning and networking opportunities, qualifications, research, resources, events, and best practice guidance for the project community, helping the profession deliver better.

APM currently has over 42,000 members and more than 470 corporate partners based across 140 countries.

Further resources

- [What is project planning?](#)
- [Webinar – Navigating difficult conversations on projects](#)
- [Research – Detect, reflect and adapt: Factors influencing critical project decisions](#)
- [Cyber security projects: Adapting to a changing threat landscape](#)
- [White paper – The Chief Project Officer. An essential part of the future C-Suite](#)



Register your interest for the Windsor Project Summit 2026

Building on the continued success of previous Windsor Project Summits, we will be returning to St George's House, Windsor Castle in 2026 for the next gathering of senior leaders from across the project profession.

The Summit is designed exclusively for C-Suite executives and senior decision makers who are shaping strategy, investment and organisational capability. It provides a confidential environment to engage in high level discussion, challenge thinking and contribute to the direction of the profession, alongside peers from the UK and internationally.

The theme and programme for the 2026 Summit are currently in development. Places will be strictly limited to preserve the quality of discussion and networking.

If you are a C-Suite leader and would like to be considered for an invitation to the 2026 event, please express your interest by completing the form below.

Invitations will be issued on a curated basis once further details are confirmed.

[Register your interest here.](#)





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