

## **Discover the 4P Superpower Model that will Help Your PMO Overcome its Kryptonite! <sup>1, 2</sup>**

**By Ana Millan, Naomi Watkins**

### **Abstract**

Occasionally, project management practices become urban legends and a curse for organizations. This case study showcases how a PMO unleashed its full potential and transformed an organization's project portfolio and project management services into legendary stories. Learn about the 4P superpower model of Preparation, Persistence, Preservation and Progression and how it became a driving force behind the PMO to rebuild, sustain and amplify its brand throughout the organization and overcome its kryptonite. Discover strategies for each of the 4P superpower elements, including educating a variety of stakeholders, actively engaging leadership, building a cohesive culture within the PMO and using emotional intelligence to build a roadmap for high demand services.

### **Background**

Project Management Offices (PMO) are often established to save the day at the last minute and bring order to a chaotic portfolio of projects. To embark on this journey, PMO innovators have access to a significant amount of information including extensive research papers, toolkits, consulting services, books and many other types of materials. However, it requires an approach engaging significant emotional intelligence to take this information in, properly apply it and obtain successful results throughout the organization's PMO journey.

When the Project Management Office's journey started at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA), the Office of Information Technology (OIT) had a vision in mind: Deliver Projects! The initial approach: a rigid PMO with lots of complex definitions and PMs that were asked to become

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<sup>1</sup> *Editor's note: Second Editions are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today's project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. Original publication acknowledged; authors retain copyright. This paper was originally presented at the [15<sup>th</sup> UT Dallas PM Symposium in May 2023](#). It is republished here with the permission of the authors and conference organizers.*

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technical subject matter experts and do it all. The result: an unpopular PMO and project management framework unable to deliver projects efficiently. There was little desire to request PMO's support across the organization.

The IT project portfolio kept growing along with the need for project management. The next approach: new PMO leadership, new project managers and a fresh look. The result: a revamped PMO focused on gaining trust, delivering quick wins and building a simple project management framework based on the existing organization's needs. PMO was back in the game! The IT organization started to understand the value of a project management framework and opened its doors to PMO.

As more and more projects were delivered, the need for more project management services kept growing as well. The new approach: a PMO fully staffed with four project managers and a new director. The result: a disjointed PMO with all kinds of project management frameworks. Each project manager had his/her own approach and style to manage projects, some were rigid and others too lean. There was no clear vision for this PMO, and the organization was losing trust. The PMO's value was tumbling again.

In the meantime, the IT organization was facing other challenges and new leadership was brought in. A new CIO (Chief Information Officer) joined the team with a strong belief in project management and in the value of a PMO. The IT leadership team focused on prioritizing the IT portfolio and determined top critical projects where PMO's support was needed. The final approach: new PMO leadership, standard project management practices and new project management talent. The result: a high-class PMO with a vision and mission, standard project management practices and procedures, a portfolio of services based on customer needs, organizational goals and an implementation approach aligned with the organization's culture. This PMO took off by building and sustaining its brand across the UTA organization, being a partner, and by looking for opportunities to improve and keep growing.

Although it took the IT organization several iterations, many failures, and trial & error, the PMO was finally established to support UTA in a collaborative and effective manner. The following sections focus on the approach taken by the current PMO at UTA. It describes how this PMO unleashed its full potential and transformed the organization's project portfolio and project management services into legendary stories including educating a variety of stakeholders, actively engaging leadership, building a cohesive culture within the PMO and using emotional intelligence to build a roadmap for high demand services.

## **UTA's Project Management Office Profile**

### **Organization Structure:**

Director, Portfolio Manager, Portfolio Administrator, Three Program Managers, Three Senior Program Managers, Two Project Managers, Two Business Analysts.

### **Services:**

Program, Project, & Portfolio Management, Resource Management, Intake & Prioritization, Training and Coaching.

### **PMO Portfolio:**

\$22.9 M in managed project budgets outside the IT organization in the last 3 years (Fall 2022)

50+ strategic projects successfully completed over the last 3 years. (Fall 2022)

### **Strategic Alliances:**

IT, Enrollment Management, Provost Office, HR, Student Affairs, Business Affairs, Campus Operation, Global Education.

### **Partnerships:**

Campus leadership, IT Governance, Risk & Compliance, Vendor Management Office, and Office of Continuous Improvement.

### **About UTA:**

As the largest university in north Texas, and 2nd largest in the University of Texas System, the University of Texas Arlington (UTA) is a Carnegie 1-Very High Research institution with 40,990 undergraduate and graduate students (Fall 2022). Approximately 6,000 international students from more than 100 countries attend UTA, which is also designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution, and an AANAPISI-Serving Institution (Asian American, Native American, Pacific Islander). Approximately 65% of UTA's 250,000 alumni reside in our Dallas-Fort Worth region, providing many opportunities for internships, research collaborations and other partnerships.

## **PMO Challenges, also known as Kryptonite**

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the term kryptonite as a "substance that causes the comic-book character Superman to become weak when he is exposed to it." Kryptonite was a

mineral that originated in Superman’s home planet that falls to Earth as a meteorite and impacts Superman’s powers in a negative manner. In PMO terms, kryptonite is an element that originates due to gaps in processes or services and strikes the PMO by weakening its value.

Through the journey of establishing a PMO and preserving its value, IT and PMO leaders encountered some successes as well as some strikes that needed immediate attention and prompt responses. These were issues becoming the PMO’s kryptonite reducing its value, potential and threatening its effectiveness. The following table illustrates the most significant challenges that the UTA PMO encountered throughout its journey.

Kryptonite	Characteristics	Level of PMO impact
<b>Unfamiliarity with the Project Management concepts</b>	Establishing a PMO when project management is mythical and there is no clear understanding of its benefit to the organization. Leaders fail to see its value and uses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Complex terminology</li> <li>- Undefined roles &amp; responsibilities to manage a projects</li> <li>- Minimum to zero project management framework</li> </ul>	High
<b>Treating all projects equally within the portfolio</b>	Having a PMO without a prioritization framework to manage a portfolio of projects. It provides limited value to the organization and leads to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A high volume and undefined portfolio</li> <li>- Limitations to differentiating top priority projects from maintenance and operational projects.</li> <li>- High demand for project managers and misuse of resources.</li> </ul>	High
<b>No standard project management framework</b>	Having a PMO without project management standards and best practices. It provides limited value and leads to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Misalignment with organization’s needs</li> <li>- A disjointed team of project managers using their own project management framework</li> <li>- Poor customer experience</li> <li>- Frustrated project teams</li> <li>- Decline in PMO team members’ morale</li> </ul>	High
<b>Immature portfolio management practices</b>	Having a PMO with a limited portfolio management framework. It leads to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Challenges to effectively prioritize projects based on value, risks, and resources.</li> </ul>	High

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of ability to track project benefits post implementation.</li> <li>- Constraints in aligning projects to the organizational strategic goals</li> <li>- Limited authority and leadership engagement to reject or to reschedule projects for later depending on the requester.</li> </ul>	
<b>Inadequate PMO sponsorship</b>	<p>Establishing and managing a PMO without strong sponsorship – a senior leader to setup the vision, strongly convey the value of project management, and is willing to support the PMO journey all the way, leads to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of support for the PMO’s growth</li> <li>- Inability to build a brand and support the organization effectively</li> <li>- Limitations to setup key services and processes and acquire top talent</li> <li>- Low value PMO</li> </ul>	Critical
<b>Inadequate PMO leadership</b>	<p>Establishing and managing a PMO without a committed leader – head of the PMO, that believes in Project Management, understands the organization’s culture, and empowers the PMO team, leads to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low credibility in the PMO’s services and efficiency</li> <li>- Low team morale</li> <li>- Poor customer service</li> <li>- Constraint mission and vision</li> <li>- Weaken the PMO’s value</li> </ul>	Critical

In addition, PMO tried different approaches and went through a few iterations to overcome its kryptonite.

Iteration	Approach	Kryptonite
<b>V1.0 – The Rigid PMO</b>	Wiki pages about project management definitions	Unfamiliarity with Project Management Inadequate PMO sponsorship
	Project Managers to become technical SMEs (subject matter experts)	
	Deliver projects	
<b>V1.5 The Revamped PMO</b>	Basic project management framework	Treating all projects equally within the portfolio
	Quick wins	

	Gain trust	Inadequate PMO sponsorship
<b>V2.0 – The Disjointed PMO</b>	Hire project management talent and new PMO leadership	No standard project management framework
	Manage IT portfolio	Inadequate PMO leadership
<b>V3.0 The Collaborative PMO</b>	Hire new PMO leadership – Director and Portfolio Manager	
	Regain trust	
	Set mission and vision	
	Establish project and program management standards and procedures	Immature portfolio management practices
	Define PMO services	
	Create a PMO brand	
	Build a strong PMO team	
	Partner with business and IT units	
	Gain consensus from influencers and resistors on new processes	
<b>V.4.0 The Never-Stop improving PMO</b>	Fully staff PMO – program managers, project managers (senior and entry level), portfolio manager, portfolio administrator, and business analysts	
	Educate the organization in project management best practices	
	Adjust project management tools and templates based on project type	Immature portfolio management practices
	Empower IT resources and business partners to manage their low priority and low complexity projects	
	Establish benefit realization and resource forecast processes	

## **Solution: *The 4P Superpower Model***

After several trial and errors resulting in different iterations, the UTA PMO finally found the driving force to rebuild, sustain and amplify its brand throughout the organization and overcome its kryptonite. This driving force is known as the 4P Superpower Model: *Preparation, Persistence, Preservation and Progression*. Each power concentrates on key strategies to proactively overcome potential kryptonite elements that could weaken the PMO's progress.

### P-1: Preparation

**Definition:** The power of gaining knowledge about the organization by understanding its vision, needs, leadership, stakeholders and culture, and how they can be connected to project, program and portfolio best practices for effective results.

**Strategy 1:** Continuously observing and actively listening for the PMO to determine how to be better equipped in its journey or roadmap. This includes identifying needs and opportunities for the PMO to support the organization more effectively. It also includes identifying potential risks that could negatively impact the PMO's journey and value.

**Strategy 2:** Research best practices and recommendations for PMO strategies, benchmark and identify the required approach based on the organization. Make any adjustments as needed. Remember: one size does not always fit all. Adjust the approach based on your organization's culture, needs and goals.

**Strategy 3:** Consult and collaborate with all the stakeholders including PMO team members. If the team does not buy into the process, the customer will not either. The PMO members have a better understanding of what is needed and can build trust with other stakeholders as they incorporate their input.

**Strategy 4:** Have a sharp vision and mission, communicate it with the PMO team and get consensus. Publish it and build the PMO services and processes based on a clear and specific mission.

**Strategy 5:** Identify strong sponsorship and allies to support any PMO actions as well potential resistors. Then, set up 1-1 conversations to post the questions, gather feedback and pitch the PMO proposal. This could be a new service, a new process or a new PMO itself.

**Strategy 6:** Consolidate all feedback that was gathered, prioritize and identify the next course of action. This includes what to incorporate, what to modify and what to retire or scratch out. Make

sure to listen and take the required action. This helps to build trust, but most importantly, establish the PMO based on what the customer expressed as needs.

**Strategy 7:** Be brave and introduce the PMO processes and services! Get ready to put them into practice! It will be an interesting journey.

### P-2: Persistence:

**Definition:** The power of not giving up! Trial and error with new processes, identify gaps and adjust until it feels right, and the organization adapts and embraces it.

**Strategy 1:** Start small! Choose low profile projects for trial and error, work with PMO allies, make any required adjustments, and build upon the results. Create small stories of success to gain trust. Touch base with the PMO key stakeholders, with the resistors mainly, for feedback.

**Strategy 2:** Communicate PMO changes within the organization, educate PMO stakeholders in project management practices including roles, responsibilities, and processes, and become SME support to manage projects efficiently.

**Strategy 3:** Go to the next level (Go Bigger)! Embrace higher profile projects and apply the new processes. Keep communicating progress and celebrate the successes with the PMO team.

**Strategy 4:** Formalize the PMO processes and services, create the standard operational procedures, make them available to others and use them consistently!

### P-3: Preservation:

**Definition:** The power of not settling! Always being attentive to risks and opportunities to survive and defend the PMO brand. Be alert in case new kryptonite elements emerge and use P1 and P2 to defeat them!

**Strategy 1:** Checks and balances! Make this a habit! Verify efficiency of the services and processes offered, gather feedback, and do a gap analysis. Adjust the PMO's services and processes as needed to be in alignment with the organization and stakeholders' needs.

**Strategy 2:** Be a caring leader! Motivate the PMO team members, hire top talent and empower them, build a cohesive and collaborative culture, and establish a strong sense of commitment.

**Strategy 3:** Be a partner! Manage up, educate stakeholders, assist project leaders in making educated project and portfolio decisions, make the PMO team members and stakeholders

accountable. Help them to be successful! Let the project sponsor and business owner be the face of the project, work behind the scenes and be strategic. It is not about tracking a list of project activities! It is about collaborating with leadership for effective decision making and strategic alignment.

**Strategy 4:** Apply emotional intelligence to gain stakeholder trust and understand their point of view. Listen and empathize with the PMO stakeholders and take actions! Maintain open communication channels and stay calm under pressure or resistance.

**Strategy 5:** Build and maintain the PMO brand! Do some public relations and marketing work. Create a website to educate PMO stakeholders, use the LMS (Learning Management System) to offer training material available to all, and coach and mentor others in using Project Management best practices. Be consistent with the PMO services.

**Strategy 6:** Most importantly, hire strong talent! Focus on finding passionate professionals with a strong desire to make a difference and create a collaborative environment where one's success translates into the team's success and vice versa. Build a strong sense of commitment.

#### P-4: Progression:

**Definition:** The power to keep growing and looking ahead using Emotional Intelligence: Be Self-Aware of your own strengths and areas for growth, know how to self-manage your reactions and emotions, particularly in stressful situations, empathize, and motivate as well as coach and mentor others.

Listen carefully, empathize, and cope with pressure and setbacks. Incorporate new services and processes based on the organization's needs and modify existing ones.

**Strategy 1:** Evaluate the PMO maturity level and identify opportunities! Consult with stakeholders and PMO team members for feedback. Benchmark and learn from other mature organizations on how they continually build upon their services.

**Strategy 2:** Partner with senior leadership to better support the organization's goals. Be alert to opportunities and risks, and plan to respond accordingly.

**Strategy 3:** Keep the big picture in mind, be strategic and take action! Never settle, always keep growing!

**Strategy 4:** Train and support the PMO team! Help them be successful and become strong leaders by fostering an environment that encourages personal growth and sense of commitment.

**Strategy 5:** Apply emotional intelligence to build or modify the PMO’s roadmap. Listen carefully to the PMO stakeholders, empathize with their needs, understand their point of view and make the necessary adjustments to the roadmap and services based on their input. The PMO stakeholders and team members are the ones using the processes leading to the creation and maintenance of the PMO brand. Therefore, their opinion is valuable and very needed!

## Results

After going through several trial and errors resulting in different iterations, the UTA PMO finally found the driving force to rebuild, sustain and amplify its brand throughout the organization and overcome its kryptonite. Using the 4P Superpower Model: *Preparation, Persistence, Preservation and Progression*, has been vital to go from an idea to a reality, to fail and try again, and to become the PMO that the organization and the PMO team members believe in.

In the PMO journey, pioneers face success and failure stories that occasionally become kryptonite to the PMO’s value. However, PMO leaders should be prepared to confront these challenges and new opportunities. Leaders should be persistent to defeat the kryptonite and lead the team through the complicated process on the path to a successful PMO journey. This preserves the talent on the team and increases the value of the services being offered. Leaders should never settle and continue progressing in the PMO journey to unleash its full potential.

The UTA PMO found the superpower to increase its value and defeat its kryptonite. This PMO story will continue if there are caring leaders with a vision and mission, a team with strong commitment and top leadership qualities, and allies that can spread out the word of the PMO value across the organization.

Power	Strategies	Result
<b>Preparation</b>	1. Continuously observing and actively listening for opportunities and potential risks to be better equipped in the PMO’s journey.	Successfully implemented key PMO processes: Intake, Project Prioritization, Portfolio Investment Categorization.
	2. Research and benchmark for trends and best practices from mature organizations.	
	3. Consult and collaborate with all the stakeholders including PMO team members.	
	4. Have a sharp vision and mission.	
	5. Identify strong sponsorship and allies.	
	6. Consolidate all feedback that was gathered, prioritize, and identify the next course of action.	

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Be brave and introduce the PMO processes and services. Get ready to put them into practice.</li> </ol>	
<b>Persistence</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Start small! Work with allies to perform trial &amp; errors and build upon the results.</li> <li>2. Finalize PMO changes, communicate with the organization, and educate PMO stakeholders.</li> <li>3. Go to the next level (Go Bigger)! Apply new processes and services to high profile projects.</li> <li>4. Formalize the processes and services, create standard operational procedures, and use them consistently.</li> </ol>	<p>The quality of projects grew tremendously as well as the demand for PMO services to lead both business and IT strategic initiatives.</p> <p>PMO was recognized as team of the year.</p> <p>Established trust and strong partnerships (i.e., Vendor Management Office, Office of Continuous Improvement, UT Austin) and allies across the organization (i.e., Provost Office, Student Success, Enrollment Management, Global Education.)</p> <p>Created PMO training course using the organization LMS (Learning Management System)</p>
<b>Preservation</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Make checks and balances a habit to keep offering efficient processes and services,</li> <li>2. Be a caring PMO leader to build and maintain a strong PMO and project teams.</li> <li>3. Be a partner, manage up, educate stakeholders, and assist leaders to make educated project and portfolio decisions.</li> <li>4. Apply emotional intelligence to gain stakeholder trust and understand their point of view.</li> <li>5. Build and maintain the PMO brand.</li> <li>6. Most important, hire strong talent! passionate professionals with strong desire to make a difference.</li> </ol>	<p>PMO standard tools and templates based on project complexity.</p> <p>Project stakeholders receive consistent services from project and program managers in the PMO.</p> <p>PMO team working on their own individual development plans.</p> <p>PMO website, PMO library of completed projects.</p>

		Audit processes to track portfolio efficiency.
<b>Progression</b>	1. Evaluate the PMO maturity level and identify opportunities.	Establishing Benefit Realization, Resource Forecast processes, and PMO Center of Excellence.
	2. Partner with senior leadership to better support the organization’s goals.	Revamping portfolio strategy, reporting, and prioritization.
	3. Train and support the PMO team members to be successful.	
	4. Apply emotional intelligence to build and/or modify the PMO’s roadmap based on stakeholders and PMO team members’ input. Their opinion is valuable and very needed.	Creating new training modules to keep educating the organization in PMO’s services and processes, and project management best practices.

### About this paper

We developed this case study to describe UTA’s PMO journey and share lessons learned and approach to build an impactful, sustainable, and collaboration PMO organization. This paper was possible thanks to contributions from Dr. Maria Martinez-Cosio, Stacey Fraser, Tom George, and members of the UTA – OIT Project Management Office team.

## About the Authors



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**Ana Millan** is a passionate leader in project and program management with over 15 years of experience. In her current role at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA), she is responsible for managing the Project Management Office, execution strategic initiatives, and leading a professional and successful team of program managers, project managers, and business analysts. Her enthusiasm in project management, has been the driving force behind the PMO's growth and success at UTA.

Ana holds a PMP certification from the Project Management Institute, a CSM credential from the Scrum Alliance, an MBA applied to Project Management and Engineering Management from the University of Dallas, and a BS in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science from the Santo Tomas University in Colombia. She can be contacted at [ana.millan@uta.edu](mailto:ana.millan@uta.edu)



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**Naomi Watkins** is a Lead Program Manager at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) with over 20 years of experience helping her customers with managing complex projects and programs. Specializing in strategy and technical problem solving, Naomi uses that expertise to develop forward-looking, sustainable programs.

By focusing on customer relationships and technical excellence, Naomi has been able to put her Bachelor of Science in Computer Science Engineering from UTA to good use. Over the years, her strengths at project management at UTA have garnered some recognition for delivering mission-critical projects, particularly those with strict regulations and tight deadlines. Naomi may spend her days at UTA, but it's the people and problem-solving that get her up in the morning.