

Five Questions (and Surprising Answers) from the 34th IPMA World Congress ¹

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INTRODUCTION

The [34th IPMA World Congress in Berlin](#), held September 17–19, 2025, showcases remarkable thematic breadth. Every presentation delivers valuable insights and sparks new questions—five of them stand out in particular.



The Congress focuses on both current and future challenges in project management. Recurring themes include agility, sustainability (ESG), and artificial intelligence (AI), which feature prominently in keynote speeches as well as specialized sessions. The program also spans a wide range of other relevant topics, from transformation and digitalization in project work to various aspects of leadership, including managing hybrid and agile teams. The evolution of PMO and PPM (Project Management Office and Project Portfolio Management) is another focal point.

Sessions dive into specific project management methods, collaboration, innovation, efficiency, risk management, governance, communication, and knowledge management. Broader issues also come into play, such as intercultural dynamics and the role of project management in society. Real-world case studies illustrate these themes, often accompanied by unexpected and thought-provoking questions.

ARE GOLDFISH THE BETTER LEADERS?

At first, it sounds like a joke: in a leadership training session, participants are asked to take inspiration from goldfish. But this quirky metaphor comes straight from the award-winning AppleTV series *Ted Lasso*—and it offers surprising insights into modern leadership. Project management expert Constantin Hoya, Director of Global Agile Organization at Olympus, uses the show as a springboard for a practical look at agile leadership.

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Hoya discovers Ted Lasso by chance, but he quickly becomes convinced. For him, the main character—a U.S. football coach who takes charge of a British Premier League team despite knowing nothing about soccer—embodies the ideal of contemporary leadership. Instead of focusing on technical expertise, Lasso prioritizes attitude, relationships, and adaptability. These qualities, Hoya argues, are crucial in a world where leaders are constantly thrown into new situations without perfect preparation.

Drawing from the show, Hoya identifies five core pillars of agile leadership:

1. **Positive Leadership:** Lasso approaches challenges with consistent optimism. This strengthens resilience and creates an environment where employees can thrive.
2. **Empathy and Relationship-Building:** Lasso takes the time to get to know his team, building trust and showing genuine appreciation for every individual. For project teams, this is a baseline requirement.
3. **Team Growth Over Individual Performance:** Success is measured not by individual achievement but by the development of the team as a whole. The point comes across clearly in the transformation of a self-centered player who learns to support others—and in the rise of a kit man who becomes head coach.
4. **Open Communication:** Lasso fosters a culture where weaknesses, conflicts, and ideas are discussed openly. Transparency, Hoya stresses, is essential in agile work environments.
5. **Learning from Failure:** The show doesn't end with a Hollywood happy ending. The team is relegated. Yet this failure is used to expose structural weaknesses and build readiness for change. A constructive error culture replaces fear of punishment.

One of the show's signature moments is the advice to "be a goldfish." With their supposedly ten-second memory span, goldfish symbolize the ability to let go of mistakes. The message: don't dwell on setbacks, learn the lesson, then move on. For Hoya, this mindset perfectly captures resilient leadership—especially in fast-moving project environments.

According to Hoya, Ted Lasso represents a leadership style built not on authority but on empowerment. Instead of measuring people strictly by numbers, he gives direction, fosters responsibility, and inspires through his own behavior. Even in stakeholder management, the show offers lessons: a once-hostile, cynical club owner gradually becomes a supporter thanks to Lasso's authenticity.

Hoya has already translated these principles into his daily work. At Olympus, he leads an international team of Agile Coaches in Japan, the U.S., and Germany. Their mission is to teach leaders not to manage by command ("push"), but by trust and encouragement ("pull"), seeing themselves as mentors rather than directors.

Behind the humor of Ted Lasso lies a serious reflection on modern leadership. The show's agile approach delivers practical insights for real workplaces—and proves that

effective leadership doesn't have to be built on abstract models. Sometimes, all it takes is a goldfish.

HOW DO YOU BRING ELEVEN CORPORATE CULTURES UNDER ONE ROOF—WITHOUT BLOWING UP THE PROJECT?

It is the largest transformation initiative in the history of public broadcasting in Germany: 11 public broadcasters, 44 subsidiaries, and around 37,000 employees—all united in a single reform project. The goal is to harmonize business processes across the German public broadcasting system and roll out a common IT platform. What at first sounds like a straightforward IT migration quickly turns out to be a profound cultural shift—one that faces unexpected resistance, especially at the top.

When Dr. Martin Backhaus takes over project leadership at the regional broadcasting institution „MDR“ in 2017, he encounters some surprising views in senior management. A few executives dismiss the initiative as little more than a technical upgrade—like installing Windows 10. But the official goals are far more ambitious: harmonizing 90 percent of processes, standardizing 70 percent, and cutting IT costs by up to 50 percent. The reform aims to streamline administration so that more of the public license fee flows into programming.

Soon it becomes clear: this is not an IT project. “It is a process and culture project,” Backhaus emphasizes. The real challenge lies in the historically grown diversity of practices across the country, from Munich to Hamburg—each broadcaster with its own DNA.

Resistance is inevitable. Many employees strongly identify with their processes, and the prospect of standardization triggers fears of losing influence or even jobs. Even managers underestimate the cultural impact at first. That makes change management all the more critical. Backhaus sets up a multi-layered concept, including a central change team and local change agents who embed the transformation within each broadcaster.

Key steps include creating a cross-functional key-user community, connecting specialists who previously worked in isolation. Communication measures—project videos, a unified corporate design, large project events with sign-language interpreters and intranet livestreams—help make the change tangible.

Backhaus distills four lessons from the ARD reform:

1. **Change management in major projects needs structure and timing.** Individual efforts aren't enough; a strong network and carefully timed interventions are essential.
2. **A clear mandate at the start is decisive.** Early waves launched without full management backing stumble. Once leadership commits, resistance drops. The lesson: no mandate, no change.

3. **Scope must remain flexible.** In 2021, parts of the project—like HR and license management—are put on hold. Adjusting scope is a sign of professionalism, not failure.
4. **Central direction requires real authority.** Where ARD's legally independent broadcasters follow central guidelines only loosely, success is limited. Clear mandates are critical.

By the end, core processes in finance, procurement, travel expense management, and controlling are standardized for more than 38,000 users. The case shows that technological modernization only works when cultural change is actively shaped—and when change management is built into the project from the start.

DO WE REALLY NEED MORE AUTONOMY IN AGILE TEAMS?

Autonomy is often hailed as a cornerstone of agile collaboration. But what if “the more the better” turns out to be too simplistic? Judith Armbruster, an Agile Coach and doctoral researcher, offers a more nuanced view. In agile teams, she finds, even limited autonomy can be motivating—especially for newcomers or in well-structured routines. Her findings challenge common assumptions and suggest that autonomy should not always be maximized, but carefully calibrated.

Drawing on her role as Head of People and Communication at a southern German software company, Armbruster uses qualitative interviews and Q methodology to capture how team members experience autonomy. Classic management theories frame autonomy as the opposite of control. But in agile teams, she sees a more complex dynamic—between individual autonomy and collective team autonomy. The real issue is not complete independence but freedom of action within a shared framework.

She identifies three perspectives on autonomy:

1. **Purpose-driven autonomy:** team members want to shape work collaboratively and learn through shared effort.
2. **Empowered-innovative autonomy:** autonomy is both a space for learning and a driver of output.
3. **Contextual-creative autonomy:** creativity flourishes within well-defined structures that provide security and room to maneuver.

Perhaps the most surprising insight: many team members don't want maximum autonomy but the right amount of autonomy. “You're often more efficient if you don't have to decide everything yourself,” one interviewee notes. Clear boundaries help people focus on meaningful work—a challenge to dogmatic calls for total self-organization.

Even “negative” experiences, like feeling overwhelmed, are often viewed positively in hindsight as sources of growth. Routine tasks, too, prove valuable for new members: they may offer little freedom but provide quick wins and orientation. In this sense, autonomy is defined less by freedom than by the ability to contribute.

Agile teams frequently manage their own collaboration. Leaders don't need to be constantly present but step in when structures break down or conflicts arise. This approach not only reduces pressure on project leaders but also strengthens team maturity.

Armbruster argues that autonomy is rarely addressed explicitly in teams. Making it a topic of open discussion is crucial: only when people know how much freedom and structure they need can the right balance emerge. The lessons apply well beyond agile contexts, extending into classic and hybrid project settings.

WHO REALLY CALLS THE SHOTS IN PROJECTS?

Sometimes it takes just five minutes to renegotiate leadership. Imagine a group building a Lego house together. Without planning, individuals take on roles: one puts on the roof before the floor is finished, another keeps an eye on the instructions, someone else sorts the bricks. This unconscious distribution of roles is both efficient and effective. In miniature, it illustrates a principle that is gaining traction in complex work environments: shared leadership.

Maximilian Müller, a project leader in the automotive engineering sector and a doctoral researcher, explores this model. Shared leadership, developed in the late 1990s and early 2000s, contrasts with the traditional single-leader model. The focus shifts from who formally holds authority to who actually demonstrates leadership behavior.

In agile and interdisciplinary project teams, hierarchies often exist only on paper. Collaboration looks more like a network where leadership flows across multiple shoulders. In dynamic environments—like product development—no single leader can make every decision, especially under uncertainty and time pressure. Shared leadership leverages the expertise and initiative of team members:

1. The project manager oversees budgets and communication.
2. Another team member handles scheduling.
3. A third makes technical decisions.

This distribution is flexible, responding to situational needs rather than rigid charts. It can be formal (top-down, with delegated roles) or emergent (bottom-up, when someone steps up spontaneously). Either way, it boosts motivation, builds team bonds, and opens learning opportunities.

Project leaders don't need to give up everything, but they do need to cede targeted responsibility. Their role shifts from controlling to facilitating—creating space for leadership to emerge, while knowing when to intervene.

The model is not without pitfalls. Shared leadership can cause confusion: who is accountable? How do power shifts play out? Formal leaders may feel undermined when others assume leadership roles informally. And it requires high levels of communication and adaptability, particularly in remote or hybrid settings. Still, shared leadership is less

a trend than a response to modern project realities. Leadership today isn't assigned, it emerges—situationally, dynamically, and effectively. For teams willing to embrace it, the result is innovation, ownership, and better outcomes. Sometimes, it all starts with a Lego house.

CAN YOU BUILD A PMO OVERNIGHT—OR DOES IT TAKE A DECADE?

Ten years may feel like a blink in business—but in project management, it can reshape everything. At the Thieme Group, a leading provider of medical information, the Project Management Office (PMO) evolves over a decade from an Excel-driven support unit into the central hub for strategic projects.

When Thieme establishes its PMO in 2006, conditions are far from ideal: rigid hierarchies, siloed departments, and little transparency. Even the term “project” is loosely defined. Instead of adopting complex tools, the team starts pragmatically with Word-based project applications, simple templates, and basic training. Certification proves crucial. Thieme chooses IPMA standards through GPM, particularly Level D and B certifications, favoring a human-centered approach that fits the company's knowledge-driven culture.

The path is not linear. In 2016–2017, the PMO nearly collapses when a leadership change strips away top-level support, leaving just one person. “That was a turning point,” recalls PMO head Jeannine Kraft. Only when senior management recommits—under the CFO from 2020 onward—does the PMO regain momentum. The breakthrough comes with the rollout of a company-wide PPM software platform between 2021 and 2023, replacing the old Office-based system.

Today, Thieme's PMO is far more than a support function. It plays three central roles:

1. **Competence Center:** advancing project methods and training staff.
2. **Strategic Engine:** collecting, assessing, and prioritizing projects of strategic importance.
3. **Project Management as a Service:** providing a pool of neutral project leaders since 2022. This independence from departmental interests proves a major success factor.

On current trends, Kraft takes a measured stance. Agility is applied selectively, where it adds real value, such as in product development. The idea of becoming a fully agile organization is deliberately rejected. Artificial intelligence is used pragmatically too—co-pilot systems assist with meeting notes, drafting texts, and analyzing dashboards, but not as a “revolution.”

Challenges remain: structured planning is sometimes seen as limiting; resource prioritization forces difficult “what not to do” decisions; and building trust requires positioning the PMO as a partner, not as corporate control.

The Thieme case shows how profound, yet fragile PMO transformation can be. Setbacks are part of the journey. What matters is resilience, organizational networks, and strategic

adaptability. For Kraft, one point is clear: a functioning PMO transformation takes at least two to three years—and often a full decade to reach maturity.

About the Author



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Sebastian Wieschowski is an editor at the German Project Management Association (GPM), the national member association of the International Project Management Association (IPMA) in Germany. He is responsible for developing GPM's media relations and serves on the editorial board of PM Aktuell, a quarterly magazine distributed to more than 6,500 GPM members as well as external stakeholders.

Born in 1985 in northern Germany, Wieschowski developed an early fascination with journalism. His formal education began with active contributions to school and local newspapers. He later completed journalistic training at the Cologne Journalism School for Politics and Economics, earned a Master Level Diploma from the School of Journalism at Eichstaett University, and undertook professional training at a regional newspaper publisher. He also holds a postgraduate M.Sc. degree in Public Health from Hannover Medical School.

In addition to his freelance journalism for national and international outlets, including major German media such as DIE ZEIT, Wieschowski has held senior communications roles since 2012. He first worked as press officer for a private university specializing in social work, then for a psychiatric hospital, and later for an industrial company. In September 2024, he joined GPM's Marketing and Public Relations department, where he focuses on strengthening the visibility and public relevance of project management through editorial formats such as storytelling.

Alongside his professional career, Sebastian Wieschowski is also active as a freelance author in his lifelong passion, numismatics. He writes for both German- and English-language specialist publications, and his work has been recognized three times by the Numismatic Literary Guild, a writers' association based in the USA.

Sebastian is a reporter at heart and enjoys discovering inspiring stories and meet people from around the world, a goal that is particularly easy to pursue in the field of project management. He can be contacted at s.wieschowski@gpm-ipma.de.