

The Human Edge in Complex Programmes: What a 2013 Rail Study Still Gets Right in 2025 ¹

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Abstract

In 2013 I conducted research into the competencies most associated with successful delivery of complex rail programmes in the UK. The study combined a practitioner survey with semi-structured interviews across two major organisations and surfaced a clear, practice-led message: while technical project management competencies are necessary, behavioural competencies, especially leadership, communication, stakeholder management, team building and the ability to motivate multidisciplinary teams - are the differentiators of success.

Twelve years on, my work as a PMO Lead across multiple industries (including large-scale ERP/digital transformations) confirms that the same human factors remain decisive. This paper distils the original findings into actionable guidance for today's PMOs and programme leaders, maps them to modern delivery contexts (agile at scale, platform consolidation, data/AI), and offers a practical playbook to embed behavioural competency into recruiting, governance and assurance. I also propose a light-weight replication to re-test the 2013 results in 2025 across sectors, creating a continuous evidence loop between research and practice.

Keywords: *project success, behavioural competencies, leadership, stakeholder management, PMO, digital transformation, ERP, rail*

1. Introduction: Tools are Table Stakes, People Decide Outcomes

Over a decade of delivery experience continues to reinforce a simple observation: in complex programmes, Gantt charts, RAID logs and stage gates create visibility; leadership behaviours create momentum. This paper revisits findings from my 2013 research and translates them into a contemporary, cross-industry context, where ERP migrations, data

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platforms and AI initiatives amplify the need for trust, communication and decision velocity.

2. Research Background (2013): What we Measured

- Context: Large, complex rail infrastructure projects in London and the UK supply chain.
- Method: Mixed methods - practitioner survey plus semi-structured interviews.
- Focus: Which competencies matter most for project success as perceived by delivery professionals.

Headline result: Technical competencies were widely regarded as necessary but not sufficient. The most frequently cited differentiators of success were leadership, communication (especially listening), stakeholder management, team building, ability to motivate, and relevant experience.

3. Why it Still Matters in 2025

Modern programmes face greater complexity (multi-vendor ecosystems, agile–stage gate hybrids, heightened security and data risks) but the human levers have not changed. Where major initiatives succeed, I observe:

- Clarity of direction from programme leadership even when plans iterate.
- High-trust stakeholder relationships built through frequent, transparent communication.
- Deliberate team design (skills + behaviours) with role clarity and decision rights.
- Governance that enables assurance supports delivery rather than policing it.

4. Implications for PMOs and Programme Leaders

4.1 Recruitment & Selection

Embed behavioural evidence into hiring and internal appointments. Suggested behavioural interview prompts:

- Stakeholder influence: “Describe a time you changed a critical stakeholder’s mind without formal authority. What did you do and why?”

- Decision velocity: “Tell us about a high-ambiguity decision you drove to closure. How did you frame options and risks?”
- Team leadership: “Give an example of lifting a team's morale during a setback. What specific behaviours did you model?”

4.2 Competency-Led Governance

Augment standard controls with people-centric checkpoints:

- Stakeholder health: sentiment pulse, issue diffusion time, escalation patterns.
- Decision health: average time from issue identification to decision; rework rates.
- Team health: clarity of roles, psychological safety indicators, throughput stability.

4.3 Leadership Development that Works

Prioritise experiential learning over classroom slideware:

- Shadowing and reverse-shadowing of senior leaders.
- Rotations through risk, commercial and business change.
- Coaching on “high-stakes conversations” (negotiations, trade-offs, scope resets).

5. A 90-Day Playbook to Embed Behavioural Competence

Days 1–30: Baseline & Design

1. Run a compact competency baseline (self + manager + 360) for programme leaders; map to delivery risk.
2. Identify 3–5 behavioural gaps most correlated with current failure modes (e.g., slow decisions, fragmented stakeholders).
3. Define observable behaviours and incorporate them into stage gate/PI planning checklists.

Days 31–60: Pilot & Coach

4. Pilot behavioural checkpoints in two workstreams (e.g., stakeholder mapping, decision SLAs, team rituals).
5. Provide coaching clinics on communication and influence; rehearse difficult

stakeholder conversations.

Days 61–90: Institutionalise

6. Bake metrics into governance; publish a leadership dashboard alongside schedule/cost.
7. Update job descriptions and promotion criteria to reflect behavioural competence.
8. Capture lessons and scale across the portfolio.

6. Practical Tooling (ready to reuse)

6.1 Competency Table - Top 5 Competencies Identified (2013 Study)

6.2 Decision Velocity SLA (example)

- Triage within 48 hours; decision within 10 working days for medium-impact items; exceptions logged with rationale.

6.3 Stakeholder Health Pulse (5 questions)

- I understand the current plan and risks.
- I know how decisions are being made.
- My concerns are heard and acted on.
- I trust the programme leadership.
- Communication is timely and useful.

7. Two Short Vignettes (anonymised)

Vignette A - ERP Migration: A retailer's ERP cutover readiness improved when the PMO introduced a daily "hot topics" ritual focusing on behaviours (clarity, ownership, escalation) rather than only checklists. Decision lead time dropped by 40% and scope disputes declined.

Vignette B - Public Infrastructure: On a capital programme, reframing governance boards into decision forums (one-page options, explicit trade-offs) reduced meeting counts while raising stakeholder satisfaction.

8. Light-Weight Replication (2025)

To refresh the evidence base across sectors:

- Reuse the original questionnaire and interview guide with minor updates for digital contexts.
- Target 100 -150 respondents across infrastructure, retail, insurance and public sector.
- Publish results open-access; compare with 2013 to identify shifts.

PMOs can participate by contributing respondents and sharing anonymised metrics on stakeholder health and decision velocity.

9. Limitations & Ethics

Findings are perception-based; triangulation with delivery metrics is encouraged. Vignettes are anonymised; no proprietary programme data is disclosed.

10. Conclusion

Complex programmes are delivered by people, not templates. Tools and processes create transparency, but it is leadership, communication, stakeholder stewardship and team behaviours that convert plans into outcomes. By placing behavioural competence on equal footing with schedule and cost, PMOs can drive faster decisions, reduce friction, and deliver stronger outcomes - whether managing infrastructure projects or digital transformations.

References (select)

- Olaghere, J. (2013). The Role of Project Management Competencies on Project Success in the Rail Industry (MBA dissertation).
- Practitioner sources and internal PMO playbooks referenced in the author's work (non-public).

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About the Author



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