

From Adaptation to Inclusion: How PMOs Are Redefining Agility and Leadership

**An exclusive interview with co-authors of
*The Evolution of the PMO: The Rise
of the Chief Project Officer – Part 7*¹
(<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0DY5VY4KV>)**

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General Introduction

A year ago, we set out to redefine project management leadership through a collaborative writing challenge. Earlier this year, we were thrilled to announce the release of "*The Evolution of the PMO: The Rise of the Chief Project Officer*," now an Amazon bestseller. This groundbreaking book brings together insights from 40 global authors, each offering unique perspectives on modern project management complexities.

This article follows part six published in the September PMWJ. It captures more of the essence of our year-long collaboration and invites you to engage with the dynamic conversations driving innovation in project management

Interviews

Introduction

For much of their history, Project Management Offices (PMOs) were judged on control: the ability to enforce standards, report status, and keep delivery predictable. That foundation remains important, but it no longer defines success. Today's organizations expect PMOs to do more than deliver projects. They are asked to adapt in real time, bridge strategy with execution, and shape environments where people and ideas can thrive.

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This shift is fuelling the rise of the Chief Project Officer (CPO) — a role that is not simply about governance but about creating value, resilience, and trust at scale. To understand how this evolution is taking shape, we spoke with four voices working at the frontier of PMO practice.

- **Carl Canlas** traces the journey from traditional project management to Agile and hybrid models, showing why adaptability is the survival trait of modern PMOs.
- **Hitesh Adesara** brings the perspective of a Silicon Valley leader, highlighting how the CPO role anchors Agile transformations across industries and sectors.
- **Remco te Winkel** explores the Agile PMO through the lens of the Theory of Constraints, explaining how bottlenecks and collaboration shape real delivery flow.
- **Erik K. Rueter** closes the circle by focusing on inclusion, empathy, and neuroscience as the force multipliers of resilient leadership.

Together, their perspectives map the contours of the next evolution: a PMO that is not only adaptive and strategic, but profoundly human.

Note that backgrounds of the interviewees can be found at the end of this set of interviews.

Updated and Expanded Interviews

Aina: Carl, you write about the journey from traditional project management into Agile and hybrid models. What cultural shifts are most difficult for organizations to make, and how can PMOs help bridge them?

Carl: The hardest shift isn't adopting new practices — it's unlearning the old ones. For decades, many organizations saw project management as synonymous with control: strict timelines, fixed plans, and reporting lines that moved up, not across. When you introduce Agile or hybrid methods, you are not just adding stand-ups or boards; you are asking leaders to surrender a level of control and trust teams to self-organize. That's deeply cultural, and it creates resistance even when the method itself makes sense.

The PMO has a crucial role here as translator. I've seen executives dismiss Agile as "chaotic" because they didn't see the underlying discipline. The PMO can frame it differently: not less control, but a different kind of control — one built on visibility, adaptability, and feedback loops. At the same time, the PMO must protect teams from being pulled back into old habits. For example, if leadership demands ten detailed status reports a week, agility collapses. The PMO can model a lighter reporting cadence that still provides confidence but frees teams to deliver. In short, bridging this cultural gap means teaching both sides — leaders and teams — to value adaptability as much as predictability.

Aina: *In your chapter, you highlight adaptability as a survival trait. What practices have you seen that help PMOs embed adaptability into daily operations, not just strategy slides?*

Carl: Adaptability only matters if it's lived every day, not just printed in a vision statement. The simplest practice is shortening feedback loops. Whether you use Agile ceremonies or other methods, what matters is creating a rhythm where progress, risks, and learnings are visible quickly enough to influence direction. I've worked with teams where retrospectives became the most valuable meeting in the calendar, because that's where culture changed. People felt safe to say, "This isn't working," and the system adjusted.

Another practice is scenario thinking. Too often, plans are written as if they'll unfold in a straight line. I encourage PMOs to build at least two alternative paths into every major plan: what if funding is cut by 20%, or what if demand doubles? When teams already have a mindset of branching, surprises are less destabilizing. Finally, adaptability has to be modelled at the top. If leaders punish pivots, no one will make them. But if leaders say, "We learned something new, and we're changing course," the whole organization sees adaptability as a strength rather than a weakness

Aina: *How do you see hybrid models evolving — are they a compromise, or the natural end state of project management maturity?*

Carl: I see hybrid not as compromise but as integration. Every methodology has strengths and blind spots. Traditional project management gives rigor in budgeting and compliance; Agile gives speed and responsiveness; Lean focuses on eliminating waste. Hybrid is about selecting the strengths that fit your environment and weaving them into a coherent approach.

In fact, I think hybrid is where maturity lies. The most advanced organizations I've worked with don't fight about "Agile versus waterfall." They ask, "What do we need for *this project, this team, this context*?" Sometimes that means a Scrum team running alongside a waterfall reporting cadence to satisfy regulators. Sometimes it means Lean practices at the portfolio level while Agile drives product teams. What matters is intentionality — choosing consciously, not defaulting blindly. In that sense, hybrid is not a halfway house. It's the destination for PMOs that have learned to adapt without losing coherence

Aina: *You've worked across industries from finance to healthcare. How does the role of the CPO shift in different sectors when leading Agile transformation?*

Hitesh: The CPO role is always about bridging strategy and execution, but the way it plays out varies dramatically by sector. In financial services, the challenge is regulatory compliance. Agile there isn't about moving fast at any cost — it's about balancing speed with a strict adherence to controls. A CPO in that environment has to be fluent in risk management and governance while still pushing for iterative delivery. In healthcare, by

contrast, the challenge is integration: how do you bring clinical teams, IT, and operations into the same cadence? There, the CPO becomes a facilitator of cross-domain dialogue.

What ties these sectors together is that transformation always bumps up against legacy systems, legacy thinking, or both. The CPO has to adapt to context, but the essence of the role is consistent: remove friction, align stakeholders, and ensure agility doesn't become theater. In every sector I've worked in, when the CPO frames Agile as a path to business outcomes rather than as a methodology war, adoption becomes far easier

Aina: *Can the CPO replace the Agile Coach, or are they complementary roles? Where do you see overlap and distinction?*

Hitesh: I see them as complementary, not competitive. The Agile Coach is vital for guiding teams in the mechanics of agility — ceremonies, mindset, team-level practices. But the CPO sits at a different altitude. The CPO is responsible for aligning Agile with corporate strategy, ensuring that the way teams work actually produces value at the portfolio level.

There will always be some overlap. A CPO must understand Agile deeply enough to challenge when it's being misapplied, and a great Agile Coach will often advise leaders on cultural shifts. But expecting one role to do both creates gaps. The risk is either a CPO bogged down in team-level coaching or a Coach trying to manage portfolio politics. The sweet spot is partnership: the CPO removes organizational barriers, while the Coach enables teams to thrive within that space. Together, they create a transformation that is both top-down and bottom-up.

Aina: *What strategies do you recommend for aligning organizational objectives with Agile principles so that transformation creates measurable impact, not just new processes?*

Hitesh: The first step is brutal honesty: why are we transforming? If the answer is "because everyone else is doing Agile," failure is almost guaranteed. The transformation must start with strategy — what outcomes matter most to the business — and then design Agile practices to serve those outcomes.

One strategy I use is value mapping. Instead of tracking only velocity or throughput, we tie metrics to business outcomes: customer retention, time-to-market, regulatory compliance, whatever is most material. That way, executives see Agile not as a cost but as a lever for impact. Another strategy is governance alignment. Too many organizations keep traditional portfolio governance unchanged and then wonder why Agile delivery feels blocked. Aligning governance — funding, approvals, reporting — with iterative delivery patterns is what makes agility scale. Finally, leadership modelling is critical. If executives still demand 18-month Gantt charts, teams will never feel safe to pivot. When leaders themselves start asking for iterative updates and celebrate learning as much as delivery, transformation sticks. That's when Agile moves from process change to cultural change.

Aina: *You integrate Theory of Constraints into Agile PMOs. How does this approach reveal bottlenecks that might otherwise go unnoticed?*

Remco: In many PMOs, bottlenecks are treated as isolated problems — “the testing team is slow” or “procurement takes too long.” What TOC shows us is that bottlenecks are systemic. If you optimize everything except the true constraint, you don’t improve flow, you just create local efficiency that doesn’t change outcomes.

I’ve worked with organizations where teams were proud of hitting sprint goals, yet value delivery stalled because approvals sat for weeks in a different part of the system. By mapping the flow of work and identifying the single constraint that governs throughput, the PMO can target interventions that actually matter. Sometimes it’s resourcing, sometimes it’s governance, sometimes it’s stakeholder availability. The discipline of TOC forces leaders to stop chasing symptoms and address the core. Once you elevate the constraint, the whole system improves — and Agile delivery begins to deliver on its promise of faster value, not just faster activity.

Aina: *Many organizations struggle with customer collaboration in PMOs. How do you frame collaboration as not just “good practice” but essential to Agile success?*

Remco: Customer collaboration isn’t a nice-to-have — it is the heartbeat of agility. Without it, Agile quickly turns into ceremony without impact. I’ve seen teams deliver flawless increments only to discover that what they built no longer matched customer priorities. The PMO’s role here is to design structures that bring the customer voice in continuously, not just at the start or end.

That could mean embedding customer representatives in steering groups, co-creating roadmaps, or even inviting end-users into sprint reviews. It also means educating executives that collaboration reduces rework and accelerates adoption. In one organization, bringing customers into backlog refinement cut post-delivery change requests by half. That’s tangible value. When leaders see collaboration not as slowing things down but as preventing waste, they begin to understand it as a business accelerator. The PMO can champion this shift, making sure customers are treated as partners in delivery rather than outsiders to be reported to.

Aina: *Looking ahead, how do you see Agile PMOs adapting to technological advancements such as AI and automation?*

Remco: Technology is going to challenge PMOs to prove their relevance. As AI automates reporting, risk tracking, and even elements of scheduling, the PMO’s value cannot remain administrative. Instead, I see Agile PMOs evolving into sense-making units. Their job will be to interpret what the data means, frame decisions, and ensure human judgment is applied where it matters most.

For example, AI might highlight that a resource pool is over-allocated. The PMO of the future won’t just redistribute tasks — it will ask whether the underlying portfolio priorities

are right, whether value is being measured correctly, whether capacity is aligned to strategy. Similarly, automation will make delivery faster, but that increases the risk of delivering the wrong things faster. The Agile PMO must therefore be the guardian of alignment and flow. In this sense, AI won't replace the PMO — it will free it to do the real work: enabling clarity, prioritization, and adaptability in a world where change is constant.

Aina: *You compare project management to a role-playing game, where empathy and inclusion are the true power-ups. How do you make this practical in teams that are under stress and deadlines?*

Erik: When teams are under pressure, empathy can feel like a luxury. Leaders think, *"We don't have time for feelings, we need delivery."* But the paradox is that stress without empathy destroys performance. People shut down, protect themselves, and stop sharing what they see. That's when blind spots grow.

The practical step is to normalize check-ins as part of the workflow. I've worked with teams that began each week with a simple two-minute round: how's your energy, what's one thing that's on your mind? It doesn't take long, but it signals that the team cares about more than tasks. Another tool is reframing deadlines as shared challenges, not weapons. When a leader says, *"We are under pressure — what can we do together to succeed?"* instead of *"Don't fail me,"* the whole energy shifts. Stress doesn't vanish, but it becomes collective rather than isolating. That's how inclusion becomes practical: you weave it into how you manage urgency, not as an afterthought

Aina: *Positive Intelligence, Human-Centered Design, and neuroscience can sound abstract to leaders. What's one simple first step a PMO leader can take tomorrow to apply these ideas?*

Erik: Start with micro-habits. You don't need a neuroscience degree to use neuroscience. For example, Positive Intelligence teaches that when you pause for just ten seconds of focused breathing or sensory awareness, you quiet the brain's stress response and open access to clearer judgment. Imagine starting a steering committee by asking everyone to take a single breath before the agenda. It sounds small, but it changes the room.

Human-Centered Design can begin with a single question: *"What does success look like from the user's perspective?"* Asking that in a planning session shifts the conversation from internal outputs to external outcomes. Neuroscience tells us our brains are wired to default to self-protection, so unless we intentionally design rituals that open curiosity and empathy, we fall back into fear and defensiveness. The PMO leader who adds even one of these practices builds momentum toward a culture where people think clearer and collaborate better

Aina: *You've written about psychological safety and empathy as the foundation of high-performing teams. How do you measure inclusion and safety in a way that organizations take seriously?*

Erik: Measurement is tricky because inclusion and safety are felt experiences. But that doesn't mean they can't be made visible. One approach I use is pulse surveys with just three questions: *Do you feel safe to speak up? Do you feel your ideas are heard? Do you feel supported when mistakes happen?* Tracking those over time reveals patterns. If safety drops when deadlines approach, that's a signal leadership pressure is eroding trust.

Beyond surveys, behaviors are the real metrics. How often do junior voices contribute in meetings? How many issues are raised early versus late? How much conflict is resolved openly versus buried? When leaders start treating these as data points — just as real as cost or schedule — inclusion becomes part of performance. I've seen organizations where reporting on safety indicators at the same level as financials changed the whole conversation. Suddenly, it wasn't "soft stuff" — it was part of delivering value. That's the shift PMOs must embrace: recognizing that human conditions are not side factors, they are core metrics of success.

Aina: *The PMO is shifting from process enforcement to being a driver of adaptability and human-centered value. From your perspective, what is the single most important capability PMOs must build to succeed in this role?*

- **Carl:** Adaptability is the survival trait. PMOs need to practice scenario thinking and shorten feedback loops so they can pivot without losing credibility. It's not enough to plan well; they must be willing to re-plan continuously.
- **Hitesh:** Alignment is key. PMOs must tie Agile practices directly to business outcomes. If the transformation doesn't move the needle on strategy, it's just ceremony. CPOs can play a unique role in building this capability across the enterprise.
- **Remco:** Flow management. Too often PMOs optimize locally while system-wide bottlenecks kill value. The most important capability is learning to see the constraint, elevate it, and keep value flowing end-to-end.
- **Erik:** Psychological safety. None of the frameworks work if people don't feel safe to speak, challenge, and share. PMOs must treat inclusion as a capability, not a side effect, and measure it as seriously as cost or schedule

Aina: *Looking ahead, how do you see the Chief Project Officer role evolving as organizations demand both agility and resilience from their PMOs?*

- **Carl:** The CPO will be the integrator — balancing hybrid approaches, blending rigor with agility, and showing executives that adaptability is not chaos but discipline.
- **Hitesh:** I see the CPO as the bridge between Agile Coaches and executives. Not replacing the coach but ensuring that agility scales to the portfolio and strategy level, especially in regulated industries.

- **Remco:** The CPO will need to be a systems architect. With AI and automation handling reporting, the real value will be designing PMOs that sense, learn, and adapt continuously.
- **Erik:** The CPO must embody human-centered leadership. Technical fluency will still matter, but the differentiator will be empathy, inclusivity, and the ability to lead people through uncertainty with resilience.

Final Reflections

The PMO is no longer only a guardian of process. It is becoming an adaptive force — able to flex between methods, bridge disciplines, and hold space for both rigor and humanity.

Carl reminds us that adaptability is not a buzzword but a survival skill. Hitesh shows how the CPO role grounds Agile transformations in strategy and outcomes. Remco demonstrates that flow, constraints, and collaboration are the real levers of value. Erik closes with the reminder that without empathy, inclusion, and safety, none of it endures.

The Chief Project Officer is not a title in waiting. It is the natural evolution of leadership when organizations demand agility, resilience, and trust in equal measure.

Interviewee Information



Dr. Carl Canlas

USA



Dr. Carl Canlas is an accomplished professional with expertise in auditing, cybersecurity and project management. He has researched, published and consulted with Fortune 1000 companies to develop tools and processes for agile auditing and integration of artificial intelligence.

Dr. Canlas holds bachelor's and master's degrees in information systems, Master of Public Administration and doctorate in Information Technology. He is currently the Assistant Professor of Information Systems at Utah Valley University. He currently holds the Certified Information Systems Auditor (CISA), Project Management Professional (PMP), PMI Agile Certified Practitioner (PMI-ACP) and Six Sigma Black

Belt certifications, among others.



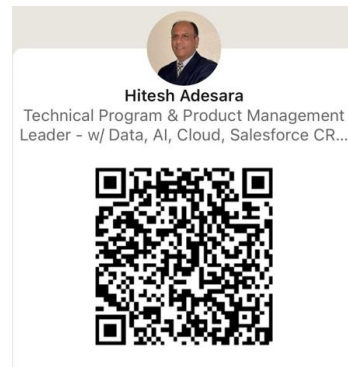
Hitesh Adesara

USA



Hitesh Asesara is a seasoned Technical Project & Program Management professional with experiences in planning, designing, developing and implementing technology solutions. He is a results oriented individual and well versed with Agile software development. He successfully applies his project/ program management, technology management, requirements/business process management skills/knowledge to deliver value added technology solutions. He received the FutureEdge50 Award by IDG for one of his team's technology innovations in 2019 and has been awarded LinkedIn Top Voice coveted badges (Software Project Management, Leadership and Agile Leadership communities) in 2024.

Hitesh holds a B.E/B.S. Computer Science degree from M.S. University of Baroda (India), 'Business Analyst Certification' from UC Irvine (CA, United States), 'Advanced Project Management'/'Strategic Decision & Risk Management' and 'IT Benchmarking' Certifications from Stanford University, Stanford, CA, United States. He is a qualified Lean Six Sigma (LSS) process owner and has successfully completed (Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL) fundamentals training.



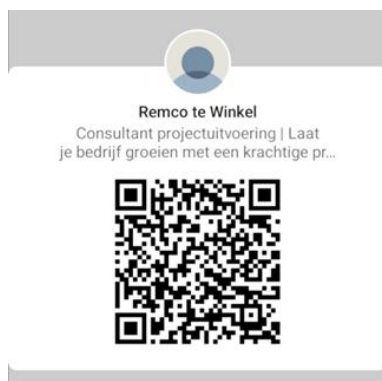
Remco te Winkel

Netherlands



Remco te Winkel has been active as a self-employed project manager since 2018 and He supports organizations in running their project, change, or development processes smoothly. He combines a good understanding of the theory with a strong hands-on mentality.

He is an Ambassador Lead EMEA and advisory Board Member for The PMO Leader. Always in pursuit of 'what works when and why', Remco's creative problem-solving skills have been instrumental in providing innovative solutions for a diverse range of organizations.



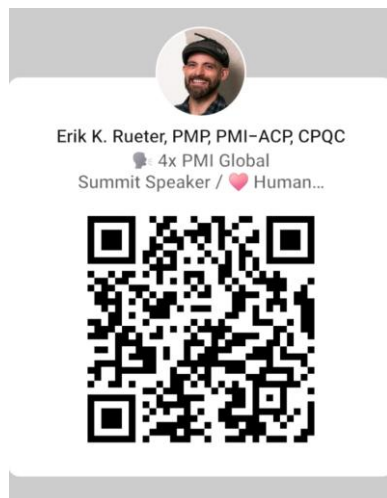


Erik K. Rueter

USA



Erik K. Rueter is a project management leader, educator, and coach focused on helping PMO leaders go from invisible to influential. Drawing on Human-Centered Design, Positive Intelligence, and neuroscience, he equips leaders to align teams, communicate decisions that stick, and build credibility at the executive table. A speaker and facilitator known for making leadership both practical and fun, Erik blends strategy with empathy to create environments where teams thrive. Outside of work, he's a marathon runner, gamer, and proud dachshund parent.



About the Interviewer



Aina Aliieva

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Aina Aliieva (Alive) is an experienced Agile Coach and a Business Consultant with 20 years of experience in different industries, from hospitality and tourism to banking and engineering, a Founder & CEO at Bee Agile and a CEO & VP of Marketing at The PMO Strategy and Execution Hub.

She is a keynote speaker on Agile, Project Management, Negotiation, People Management, and Soft Skills topics. She was a guest instructor at NASA in 2022 & 2023 with topics on Conflict Resolution & Negotiation and Facilitation Techniques.

Her book, "It Starts with YOU. 40 Letters to My Younger Self on How to Get Going in Your Career," hit the #1 position in the #jobhunting category on Amazon and is featured in a Forbes Councils Executive Library.

She also contributed to the books "Mastering Solution Delivery: Practical Insights and Lessons from Thought Leaders in a Post-Pandemic Era", "Green PMO: Sustainability through Project Management Lens" and "Agile Coaching and Transformation: The Journey to Enterprise Agility".

Aina was also a Finalist in the Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year category in 2021 by the Canadian SME National Business Award

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