Lessons Learned from the PMMM Research Series[1]

Maturity Evolution: The 'Discontinuity' Factor[2]

By Darci Prado, PhD

ABSTRACT

This is the eighth article in the series *Lessons Learned from the PMMM Research*. In this paper, we analyze the effect of discontinuity on the evolution of a department's maturity. The scenarios that lead to discontinuity and the main types of this phenomenon are analyzed. Finally, the impact of discontinuity has on organizations and the careers of the professionals directly involved is analyzed. For a proper understanding of this article, readers should be familiar with the previous papers published in this journal [4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10].

Lessons Learned from Maturity Research

- Article 1 – Contextualization
- Article 2 – Peculiarities of the "Performance versus Maturity" relationship
- Article 3 – Heterogeneity Matters
- Article 4 – Maturity Evolution: A Challenging Journey
- Article 5 – Maturity Evolution: Only a Few Get There
- Article 6 – Benchmark Organizations in Project Management
- Article 7 - Maturity Evolution: Towards Excellence

1 – INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PMO FOR MATURITY EVOLUTION

The evolution of a project department's maturity strongly depends on the proper performance of the PMO. The PMO is responsible for assessing the current maturity level, identifying improvement needs, implementing a growth plan, and monitoring its execution.

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[1] *The Project Management Maturity series of articles by Prof Darci Prado is based on his extensive research on this topic in Brazil and other countries. Darci is the developer of the Prado Project Management Maturity Model which has been successfully implemented by many organizations in Brazil. More about this model and related research can be found at. https://maturityresearch.com/en/home-en/*

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Over the last 30 years, in our work as researchers and consultants, together with the consulting project management team, we have observed that the life of a PMO in Brazil is often subject to interruptions. These cases are not rare and deserve greater visibility due to their harmful effects on organizations and professionals, whose careers can be significantly impacted.

The causes of this phenomenon lie both within the internal environment of the organization and in the external economic health of the country. To understand what may lead to the discontinuity of a PMO's work, it is necessary to analyze both the organizational and macroeconomic contexts, as discussed below.

PART A
REVIEWING ORGANIZATIONAL SCENARIOS

2 – *"IT IS ENOUGH TO BE GOOD"*

In article 10 of this series (*Towards Excellence*), we drew a parallel between our research and Jim Collins' work presented in the book "Good to Great" [3]. According to Collins, starting the pursuit of excellence means realizing that the current business model may become obsolete or that there are more promising opportunities that the organization could seize to gain a leading market position. The pursuit of excellence requires abandoning the comfort zone and embracing a long journey full of uncertainties—possibly involving market changes, new products, or personnel adjustments. It is a demanding and risky journey, and not everyone is willing to take it. For most, it is safer to remain in the comfort zone. According to Collins [3]:

> *"The vast majority of companies never become excellent, just because being good is enough - and that is their main problem. Excellence, as we have seen, is largely a matter of conscious choice."*

As stated in that article, remaining in the comfort zone has its advantages when compared to the risks of pursuing excellence, but that does not mean day-to-day life is easy. Within this zone, organizations are born, mature, and compete fiercely for survival and growth. Some stand out, others are acquired, and many disappear. Most stay in the same place. Very few become centennial, and even fewer embark on the journey toward excellence (Figure 1).

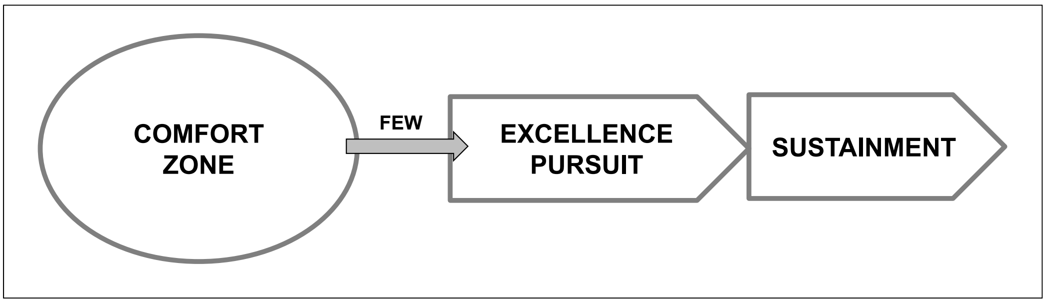


Figure 1: The organization's journey in the pursuit of excellence.

Knowing which position in Figure 1 an organization occupies at a given time is important in order to understand how the work of a PMO is viewed by senior management and whether there is any risk to its continuity.

3 – THE DISTRIBUTION OF DEPARTMENTS BY MATURITY LEVELS

As discussed in article 5, *Evolution of Maturity: Only a Few Get There* [8], between 2005 and 2024 only 12% of project departments in Brazilian organizations reached excellence (levels 4 and 5). In 2024 specifically, this percentage was 13%. Levels 1, 2, and 3 are strongly associated with the comfort zone and represent the majority of organizations, as illustrated in Figure 2.

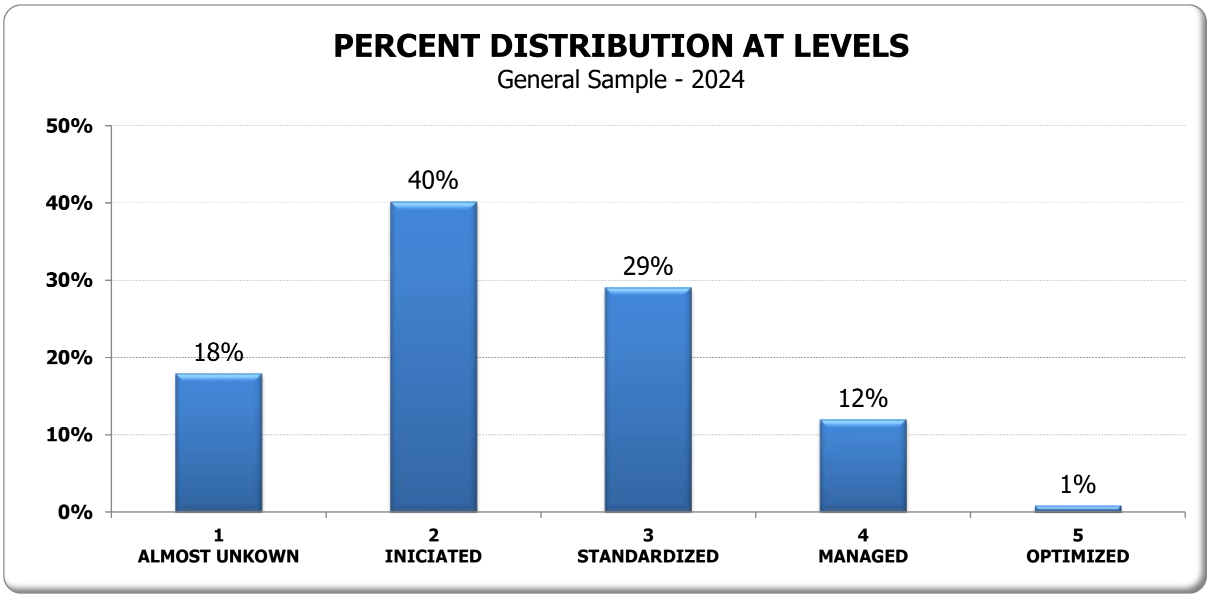


Figure 2: Percentage distribution across maturity levels in 2024 [1].

As we discussed in article 7 of this series, *"Collins' research showed that a characteristic commonly found in organizations in the 'comfort zone' is apathy toward bolder initiatives that* *could affect their business model, their management model, or their organizational culture. This is critical because of the hindrance it causes to the evolution of project management in these organizations."* [10].

3 – CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS (CSFs) FOR MATURITY EVOLUTION

Maturity level 4 of the department is necessary for the organization to reach the stages we call the 'search for excellence' and 'sustainment'. This is seen when a project department is called upon to contribute to the organization's pursuit of excellence. As discussed in article 4 – *Evolution of Maturity: A Challenging Journey* [7] – our consulting experience and benchmark organization analysis has shown that some factors are decisive for this evolution. These factors were grouped into the so-called Triple Condition (Figure 3): importance, support and leadership.

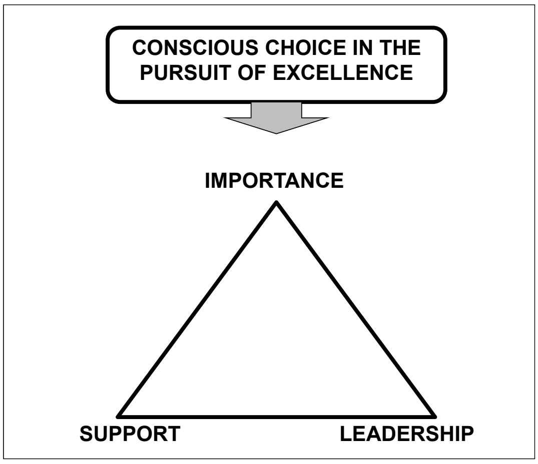


Figure 3: Critical Success Factors – The Triple Condition [7].

1 – High Importance of projects to the organization

- There is a strong need for project results to achieve strategic and/or business objectives, or to enhance the organization's competitiveness.
- Current project results are inadequate or need to be improved.
- For such important projects to deliver the expected results, the use of project management is essential, either due to the number of projects or their complexity. Without this, results fall significantly short of what is required.
- How to determine whether a project portfolio is of high importance to the organization? Answer: from the perspective of top management.

2 – Decisive support from top management

- Top management has an adequate understanding of the project environment.

- It becomes appropriately involved whenever necessary to expedite and/or make the project management process more assertive.

3 – Strong leadership in the journey

- There must be an "institutional leader" who fully understands the need for maturity evolution, embraces this cause, and works diligently for its success.

The lack of these factors in an organization's project scenario can severely frustrate initiatives for maturity evolution and may even affect the continuity of a PMO's work.

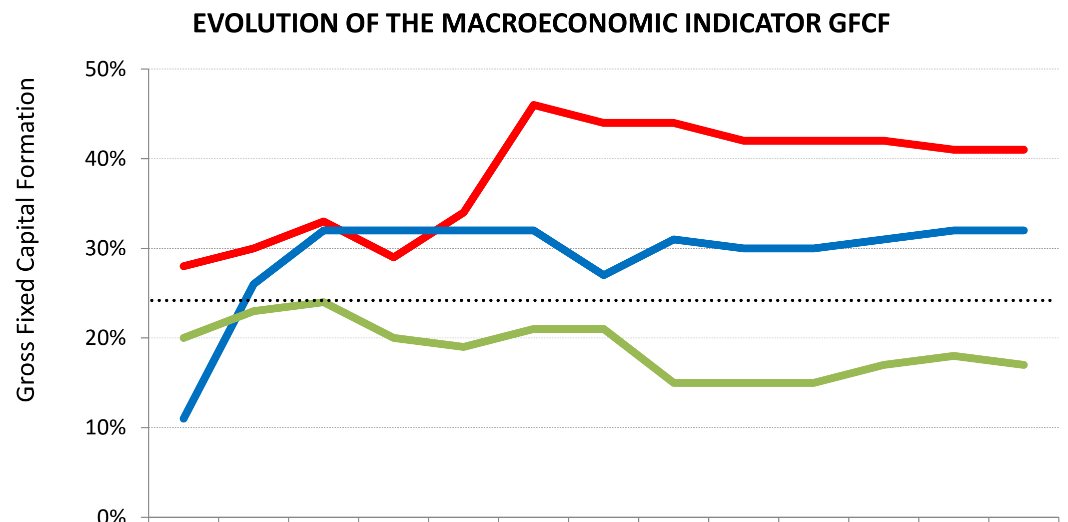
PART B
MACROECONOMIC SCENARIO

Brazil is among the ten largest economies in the world, with a diversified industry and world-class agribusiness. However, it has struggled for decades with social inequality and has been unable to keep up with the development of other nations.

A frequent comparison is made between Brazil, China, and South Korea. These countries had somewhat similar socioeconomic conditions after World War II, but today China and South Korea are global powers with solid, competitive economies and strong social development.

One widely used indicator for comparing economic development is the Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF). It represents the percentage of GDP invested in fixed assets—equipment, infrastructure, and improvements to existing assets.

In Figure 4, we show a comparison of the evolution of the GFCF indicator for China, South Korea, and Brazil. The starting point is 1960, the year in which the indicator was created by the World Bank [13]. A GFCF above 22.5% is the minimum needed for a high investment rate and productive capacity expansion [12].



	60	70	80	90	00	10	12	14	16	18	20	22	23
China	28%	30%	33%	29%	34%	46%	44%	44%	42%	42%	42%	41%	41%
South Korea	11%	26%	32%	32%	32%	32%	27%	31%	30%	30%	31%	32%	32%
Brazil	20%	23%	24%	20%	19%	21%	21%	15%	15%	15%	17%	18%	17%

Year

Figure 4: Evolution of GFCF for China, South Korea and Brazil [13]

Over the years, Brazil's GFCF values have fluctuated significantly but failed to achieve sustained growth. Since the political and economic crisis of 2015, the indicator has ranged between 14% and 17% [13]. Interestingly, the number of participants in our maturity surveys has also declined since 2014, as shown in Figure 5 [1]. The explanation for this is not simple. There are several causes, and I believe one of them is the political/economic crisis that erupted in 2015.

Figure 5: Evolution of the number of participants in maturity surveys [1].

Countries or companies with high maturity in project management tend to optimize the return on investments.

PART C

CONCLUSIONS ON THE ABOVE SCENARIO ANALYSES

The analyses above show that Brazilian project departments have operated in recent years under conditions that pose risks to their continuity. The last ten years have been marked by:

- An uncertain political and economic situation,
- Business investment insecurity,
- A predominance of departments at maturity level 2.

In such a context, the risk of discontinuity in project management areas is not surprising.

PART D
THE "DISCONTINUITY" FACTOR

4 – MAIN TYPES OF DISCONTINUITY

The journey of different organizations toward maturity evolution can be represented by Figure 6, where it is demonstrated by lines 1 and 2 that only a few reaches the level of excellence [5]. Line 5 is a typical representation of a department in an organization that prefers to remain in the comfort zone, maintaining its maturity at a medium level, usually with a value between 2 and 3.

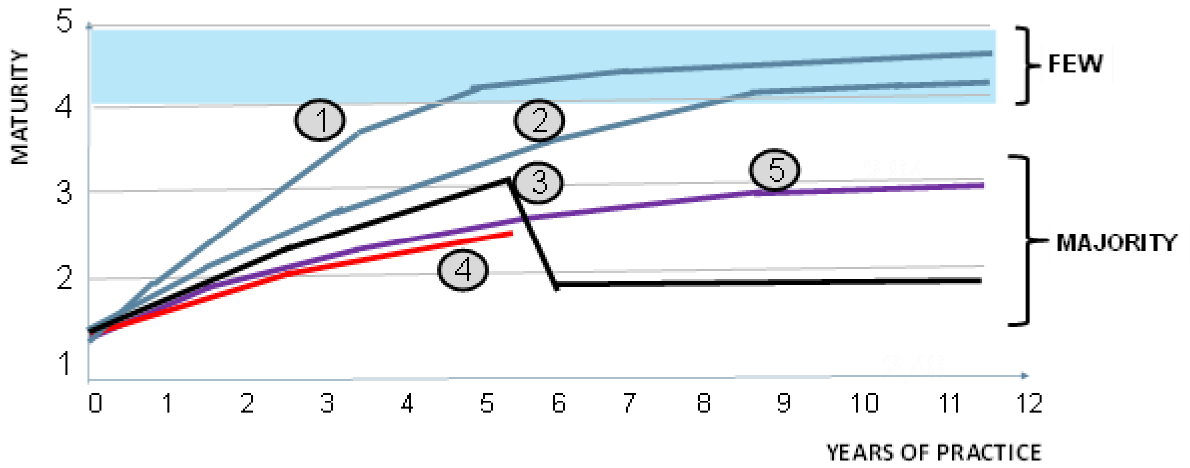


Figure 6: Different journeys of organizations to advance their maturity [7].

Lines 3 and 4 represent the main types of discontinuity that can affect the PMO's survival:

- **Line 3** shows the situation of departments that began to evolve but suffered a process of depletion, resulting in the replacement of the team involved in projects (PMO and project managers) with others of less competence.
- **Line 4** shows a more critical situation than the previous one. The project management practice was simply abandoned. These phenomena reflect uncertainties in the nation (economic aspects) and/or in the organization (financial and strategic aspects).

These two types of discontinuity can occur in a variety of situations, as we will now describe.

a) "*The PMO no longer adds value*" – The Ghost of the Comfort Zone

In most organizations, a PMO is established when the organization is at level 2 and needs to progress toward level 3. This can lead to a solid PMO if the projects in question are truly important for the organization (as discussed in the section on Critical Success Factors), if the management changes are well accepted, and if they allow cultural transformation.

However, this is not always the case. Sometimes a PMO is created to move toward level 3 but fails to change the level 2 way of working ("everyone in their own way"). At best, it adds some value to documentation and training. In such cases, its existence may be uncertain. It may continue to operate with little influence or be shut down after some time under the claim that "it is no longer necessary." It might even be reestablished later — thus repeating the cycle.

This "each in their own way" approach prevents a global view of project performance, leading to repeated mistakes.

The root cause often lies in the difficulty of changing an entrenched culture among project managers. Moving from level 2 to level 3 requires abandoning multiple personal tools (software) and adopting a unified platform with dashboards — a hallmark of level 3. As discussed in the previous article (*Towards Excellence*), cultural change is a complex challenge, often beyond the PMO leader's skills. In such cases, support from a C-level executive or, preferably, an institutional leader is essential. Without it, apathy prevails — and as mentioned before, apathy critically hampers maturity evolution, which is almost always tied to cultural change.

b) End of a Strategic Cycle in the Organization

Project management is often used to implement organizational strategies in private companies. However, when a strategic cycle ends and a new one has not yet begun, the project management area may be dismantled, as illustrated by line 4 in Figure 6. Project professionals (PMO and project managers) are usually reassigned to other areas. When the next strategic cycle starts, a new — and often less experienced — team is formed. This leads to a drop in both maturity and project results.

c) Financial Crisis within the Organization

Another situation that may lead to the dismantling of the project area (line 4 in Figure 4) is a severe financial crisis. The causes may vary: an economic crisis in the country, loss of market share, or emerging competitors. In such cases, investment cuts make the project team (PMO and project managers) unnecessary. These professionals are not always reassigned, and layoffs may occur.

d) Change of Political Party in Government

When a political party loses an election and a new one takes office (at federal, state, or municipal levels), strategic and management ruptures may occur. A new administration with different political orientations may have divergent perceptions of priorities and the importance of project management — or may simply choose to act differently to avoid continuing the predecessor's initiatives. Consequently, the project management area can suffer depletion, as shown by line 3 in Figure 6. In public administration, dismissals are uncommon, but transfers to other departments are frequent.

5 – CHANGE IN TEAMS

Below are two cases of discontinuity that do not eliminate the PMO, as described earlier.

a) **Maturity Stabilization and Decline of Interest in the Topic**

This occurs when a department decides to stop pursuing further maturity growth, even though the PMO remains active. The decision comes from the perception that maturity has stabilized, with no further progress in sight. This is common when maturity levels reach between 2.5 and 3.2, but it may also happen above level 4. These correspond to the curves 1, 2, and 5 in Figure 6 — organizations in the comfort zone or sustainment phase (Figure 1). In such cases, maturity assessments are performed every 2 or 3 years only to confirm that there has been no decline.

For organizations in the comfort zone, this usually happens because projects are not important enough to engage top management or attract an institutional leader (Figure 3). For organizations in the sustainment phase, it occurs because progressing to level 5 is extremely difficult.

b) **Replacing the Team**

This is a case that does not imply a decline in maturity — perhaps the opposite. It is included here because of its impact on those involved in project management. It happens when top management concludes that the PMO and/or project managers are not ready for new challenges and decides to hire new professionals, resulting in transfers or dismissals of existing staff.

PART E

IMPACT ON THE ORGANIZATION AND THE CAREER OF PM PROFESSIONALS

The cases discussed above can have harmful effects on both private and public organizations, representing the loss of valuable management experience accumulated over years. Often, new and inexperienced teams must start over, repeating past mistakes.

They can also impact the careers of PMO professionals and project managers, sometimes resulting in dismissal. How to live with this?

Improving employability—both within and outside the organization—can be a good strategy to mitigate the consequences of losing a position without immediate alternatives.

Professionals must remain attentive to internal and external scenarios that affect organizations. For instance, a comfort zone combined with level 2 maturity and no prospects for growth may signal an alert for PMO professionals. The end of a strategic cycle combined with an economic or political crisis may also indicate potential risk.

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Darci Prado is a consultant and partner of Falconi Consultants in Brazil (https://en.falconi.com/). He holds a Chemical Engineering degree from UFMG (Federal University of Minas Gerais). He concluded graduate studies in Economical Engineering at UCMG (Catholic University of Minas Gerais) and holds a PhD in Project Management from UNICAMP (Campinas University). He has worked for IBM for 25 years and was a professor at UFMG Engineering School for 32 years. He got the IPMA Level B Certification in 2006. He was one of the founders of Minas Gerais State and Parana State PMI chapters.

In 2005, together with Russell Archibald, he pioneered a Project Management Maturity research in Brazil and expanded to Italy in 2010. This research is ongoing, and it is the only one of its kind in the world regarding the analysis of the relationship between maturity levels and success for long period of time (20 years). As an international speaker, he has been invited multiple times to present in the USA, Italy, France, Portugal and Mexico. He is the author of nine books on project management (https://www.editorafalconi.com/loja?lang=en) and is also the author of a PM methodology and a PM software application.

He is also the author of a series of three books about Operations Research and one book about innovation. All his books have sold 100K+ copies in Brazil, Italy and Spain.

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