

# **Beyond the plan: A 3-step framework for repairing relationships and recovering delivery<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Many project recoveries focus on re-baselining scope, timelines, and resources, but the real cause of stalled delivery is often relational - a breakdown in trust, alignment, or emotional safety. This paper introduces a practical three-step framework for relational recovery: (1) Pause to diagnose: listen and identify the root tensions behind delivery risk; (2) Repair before relaunch: rebuild trust through small commitments and shared framing; and (3) Reframe governance: clarify roles and decision-making to reduce friction. Developed through lived practice and practitioner insights, the model reframes recovery as both a structural and emotional process. It shows that sustainable delivery cannot be achieved through plans alone - it requires trust repair, clear governance, and intentional leadership. The paper repositions the project manager as a relational translator and trust broker, offering a practical lens for recovery in complex, fast-paced environments.

**Keywords and Phrases:** *Trust repair, conflict recovery, governance, reframing, stakeholder alignment, emotional dynamics in delivery*

## **Introduction**

Project recovery is often framed as a technical recalibration - revisiting scope, re-baselining schedules, reallocating resources. But many projects don't fail because the plan was wrong. They stall, drift, or implode because trust has eroded, alignment has fractured, and stakeholders are no longer emotionally or politically invested in the work.

In high-pressure environments, delivery leaders are expected to maintain momentum while navigating interpersonal tension, ambiguity, and organizational fatigue. Yet the tools we give project managers are focused on artifacts - charters, status reports, RACI matrices - while the most critical delivery risk often sits between the lines: damaged relationships, invisible power dynamics, and unspoken misalignment.

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This paper explores relationship repair as an underutilized but essential lever in project recovery. Drawing from personal experience managing complex programs in lean, acquisition-heavy organizations - and supported by insights from seasoned practitioners across industries - it argues that trust is not a byproduct of delivery; it is a precondition for it.

Through a reflective case study and first-person accounts, the paper surfaces patterns where recovery depended less on timelines and more on tone - where small acts of re-engagement, neutrality, and shared decision-making restored movement. These moments inform a simple, practical 3-step framework for relational recovery:

1. **Pause to diagnose:** Identify root tension before escalating delivery actions.
2. **Repair before relaunch:** Rebuild trust and alignment through intentional facilitation.
3. **Reframe governance:** Revisit structures and decision rights to reinforce resilience.

The goal is not to position the PM as a therapist or fixer, but to name the emotional and political labor that often accompanies real recovery, and to equip PMs and sponsors alike with language and tactics to navigate it. This paper invites project professionals to reframe “soft skills” as structural enablers, and to view trust not as a variable, but as a vital input to every successful project outcome.

The value of this model lies in its ability to re-activate delivery momentum where traditional tools fall short. It enables teams to move forward not by enforcing compliance, but by restoring connection.

## Problem Framing

Project recovery is generally understood as a tactical exercise: re-scoping, re-prioritizing, re-planning. But beneath stalled timelines and slipping deliverables often lies something harder to quantify - fractured trust, interpersonal friction, or a silent breakdown in alignment. These “soft” failures rarely show up on a risk log, yet they are frequently the true blockers to progress.

Project managers are rarely equipped, or empowered, to address this layer. While they’re expected to report on milestones and escalate risks, they often become de facto relationship brokers, quietly mediating tension between sponsors, departments,

and vendors. This role is rarely formalized, and yet when trust breaks down, it is often the PM who is left holding the pieces.

As one contributor, Mike Smith, put it: “If you’re a PM who just reports status... you’re seen as the one calling out others for failure. They’ll never trust you.” His insight underscores a deeper issue: many PMs are trapped between delivery and diplomacy, with no framework for navigating fractured relationships while trying to move the work forward.

At the leadership level, the tone is set by sponsors, but when multiple sponsors exist (as in large healthcare systems or post-merger organizations), their competing priorities can create tension, uncertainty, or outright power struggles. In one case described by Dustin Baker, a project and implementation leader, two sponsors had conflicting agendas and paralyzed the delivery team until the project paused to realign decision-making protocols.

Compounding the issue, in environments shaped by past leadership failures (such as M&A integrations), teams may enter a project already skeptical or disengaged. Stewart MacDonald shared how some of the most talented people he worked with had been “burned” so many times they no longer spoke up. “That was a massive and rewarding exercise in team building,” he reflected - but one that required emotional trust, not just technical planning.

Despite the frequency of these dynamics, most recovery guidance treats stakeholder issues as noise rather than signal. Few frameworks explicitly acknowledge the emotional, political, and relational dimensions of delivery breakdowns - let alone offer tools to resolve them.

This paper aims to fill that gap by naming relationship repair as both a diagnostic lens and a tactical intervention. It offers a framework for addressing the root causes of misalignment and distrust, not just their symptoms, and makes the case that recovery cannot succeed without trust being rebuilt, at every level of the project.

This pattern - of relational breakdown stalling delivery - plays out in the case example that follows, where conflict between executive sponsors halted decision-making until trust and structure were intentionally rebuilt.

## **Case example: A pause, a framework, and a shift in tone**

The following case comes from a large healthcare software implementation involving multiple departments across a client organization and exemplifies the lived experience that informed the creation of the 3-step model presented in this paper.

The project had entered what appeared to be a stall: progress was inconsistent, decision-making was fragmented, and meetings were beginning to feel performative rather than productive. While timelines and scope appeared stable on paper, the relational fabric of the project was starting to fray.

At the heart of the challenge were two executive sponsors from different departments, each charged with advancing their respective agendas while also jointly steering the implementation. Both had strong perspectives, and both had legitimate authority to make decisions that could affect the project timeline, scope, and priorities. But in practice, their priorities frequently conflicted. Week after week, standing project meetings would devolve into passive resistance or visible tension, with key decisions left unresolved.

The project manager on the vendor side recognized that the issue was not procedural, it was relational. Progress wasn't being blocked by bad planning, but by discomfort, defensiveness, and quiet power struggles between the sponsors. Instead of pushing forward with the regular cadence, the PM made a strategic call: he paused the weekly project meetings for two weeks and initiated individual listening sessions with each of the key stakeholders.

These sessions weren't designed to generate decisions, but to surface concerns, power dynamics, and emotional roadblocks that had gone unspoken. The one-on-one conversations gave each sponsor space to articulate their frustrations and clarify what was at stake from their perspective. In doing so, the PM created neutral ground for understanding, without asking anyone to concede or perform alignment publicly before it was truly there.

The outcome of these sessions was the co-creation of a new decision-making framework:

- Each sponsor delegated day-to-day project decisions to their “boots on the ground” team members - trusted individuals who had long-standing collaborative relationships.

- An Executive Steering Committee was established, including both sponsors and a third senior leader from outside the project. This third party served as a neutral presence and tiebreaker when necessary.
- Escalations became structured and purposeful, rather than default or emotional.

Once the new governance structure was in place, something shifted. Project team meetings began to feel different - lighter, more solution-oriented, and less burdened by unresolved tension. According to Dustin, the senior stakeholder who shared the story, “The team now on the project calls were working to make decisions collaboratively in an effort to not escalate to the sponsors.” In other words, governance didn’t just clarify who had the final say, it restored psychological safety and encouraged compromise.

This case illustrates the three steps at the heart of this paper’s framework:

1. **Pause to diagnose:** Rather than layering more meetings or project plans on top of a relational problem, the PM paused to assess what was really causing the friction. The pause created space for honesty, pattern recognition, and emotional recalibration.
2. **Repair before relaunch:** The listening sessions weren’t conflict mediation, but they were relationship repair, built on understanding, validation, and trust-building. They allowed the PM to restore connection without forcing premature consensus.
3. **Reframe governance:** By restructuring decision-making and defining escalation pathways, the PM helped the team avoid repeating the same breakdowns. The framework didn’t eliminate all tension, but it created a container that channeled tension constructively.

While no project is immune to interpersonal strain, this case reinforces that recovery is rarely just about project plans. It is about the emotional infrastructure that allows those plans to succeed. And sometimes, a well-timed pause and a humble conversation can unlock more momentum than a dozen Gantt charts ever could.

## Patterns & Tactics from the Field

To complement the author’s personal experience, a group of seasoned practitioners - project managers, consultants, and team leads - were invited to share brief reflections

on trust, recovery, and stakeholder alignment. Their insights reinforce a central theme: delivery risk is rarely just about resources or planning. Often, it's about relationships - strained, misaligned, or abandoned - and the labor required to rebuild them.

**A. Alignment is a living practice** [This theme supports the following parts of the framework: *Pause to diagnose* and *Reframe governance*].

Projects often begin with clarity, but misalignment creeps in as assumptions shift, decisions pile up, and metrics lose meaning. As Jennifer Jacobucci, a leader in Customer Excellence, put it: "Alignment is key to positive momentum and is required routinely throughout the project to be successful." She emphasized the need for shared metrics, not just shared intent.

Anas Abidrabbu, a Healthcare consultant, echoed this in more operational terms: "Even the best facilitation can only go so far without a foundation of clear processes and team alignment."

These voices challenge the assumption that alignment is a one-time kickoff exercise. Instead, they position it as a practice - something that must be monitored, revisited, and refined as the project unfolds.

**B. Trust isn't agreement, it's commitment** [This theme aligns with the following part of the framework: *Repair before relaunch*].

Many contributors stressed that trust doesn't mean harmony, it means navigating disagreement productively. As Jennifer clarified: "Trust is different than agreeing on all aspects. It's built by healthy discussions and the shared alignment that once a decision is made, we're all in."

Diane Clark, recalling a difficult client implementation, described how incremental trust-building created forward motion: "The client realized I wasn't going to give up on them, that's when the relationship started to shift." Her persistence was relational, not just procedural. Trust wasn't granted; it was earned through presence, consistency, and mutual respect.

**C. What happens when trust is gone**

Some contributors reflected on projects where repair wasn't possible. Laura shared a story from a program plagued by favoritism and fear, where PMs were rotated frequently, scapegoated, and publicly undermined: "There was never any way

for management to repair the relationship with me, not that they ever tried.” Despite delivering strong results through team trust and internal cohesion, her experience illustrates a painful truth: when leadership trust is lost and not restored, talent walks, and programs fail.

Laura’s experience went beyond poor leadership - it was a psychologically harmful environment that, in her words, nearly broke her professionally. Gallows humour became a coping mechanism. “They put us on a lower floor so if we jumped, we wouldn’t die, we’d just get patched up and sent back in.” Programs like this don’t just fail, they wound. Recovery, in these cases, may not be possible without a complete reset of the culture that caused the damage.

Stewart described similar dynamics in post-merger environments, where team members had “learned not to speak up “after years of reorgs and instability: “They were two of the most talented people I’ve worked with - completely underutilized because they’d been burned too many times.” His takeaway: team building isn’t just about collaboration tools or personality styles; it’s about restoring voice in places where it’s gone silent.

**D. Getting unstuck requires creativity and courage** [This theme reinforces the creativity needed in all three steps of the framework].

Several practitioners pointed out that project recovery isn’t just a matter of governance, it’s a creative, intuitive process. Mike, a delivery leader, drew an analogy between recovery and loosening a stuck bolt: “Getting unstuck is a special skill. You might use WD-40, a breaker bar, heat, or even cut it off. The point is, you need different tools, and the creativity to know which one to use.” He emphasized that recovery doesn’t happen through status reporting alone. PMs must be present, flexible, and engaged: “The PMs and leads who had their sleeves rolled up, who were in it, not just reporting on it - that’s when we really moved forward.” His reflections position the PM not as a passive messenger, but as an active translator and catalyst, capable of helping a team navigate ambiguity and inertia through relational effort and strategic improvisation.

## Closing Reflection

Taken together, these voices reinforce the practical value of the 3-step framework. It offers PMs a language and a method for navigating the human complexity of recovery. The stories offer a layered portrait of what project recovery demands: presence,



humility, consistency, and imagination. They suggest that rebuilding trust isn't just a soft skill, it's a delivery skill, and that the fastest way to recover a project may not be a new timeline, but a new tone.

As one contributor put it: "Project momentum doesn't begin with a Gantt chart. It begins when people feel safe to speak, safe to decide, and safe to try again."

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Editorial Note: AI has been used in this paper for grammar and language improvement, and editorial assistance.

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## About the Author



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**Karen Bruer** is a senior program and project manager with more than 25 years of experience leading cross-functional initiatives across technology, healthcare, and business operations. She has deep expertise in systems optimization, M&A integration, and project recovery, with a focus on aligning people, process, and technology in complex environments. Karen has led enterprise programs involving Salesforce, Smartsheet, and NetSuite, and has been recognized for her ability to rebuild trust and collaboration in high-stakes projects. She combines structured delivery discipline with a relational approach that values communication and trust as key enablers of success.

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