

Why Teams Need Systems to Thrive ¹

By Jeff Oltmann

As a senior leader, you hire smart people. You invest in their growth. You carefully cultivate results. But even high performers can struggle or burn out when the systems around them don't work well.

My training as an engineer taught me to see systems everywhere - how work flows, where it bottlenecks, and how small changes ripple through the whole. Those same principles apply to organizations as much as they do to engineering.

So when leaders ask me, "We've got good people—why aren't our projects delivering?" my answer is often: look at the systems as well as the people.



Designed or accidental, systems shape how your organization runs.

When you see your organization this way, you build create intentional systems instead of just accepting whatever happens.

Seeing your organization as a system doesn't mean adding bureaucracy. It means recognizing that outcomes, good or bad, are driven by how work and communication flow. For example, if teams are unclear about priorities, stuck in decision gridlock, or reinventing the wheel, there is probably at least one system issue lurking under the surface.

Three systems to strengthen

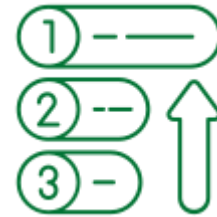
Here are three practical systems leaders can tune, whether they're building a PMO, managing a portfolio, or leading a project-driven enterprise.

¹ How to cite this article: Oltmann, J. (2025). Why Teams Need Systems to Thrive, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XIV, Issue XII, December.

1. Alignment on priorities and objectives

Too many teams are busy, but not aligned. As Thoreau said (in a different context), “It’s not enough to be busy. So are the ants. The question is, what are we busy about?” Ensure that people know:

- What work truly matters in the long and short term
- What to say “no” to
- How to adjust priorities as circumstances change

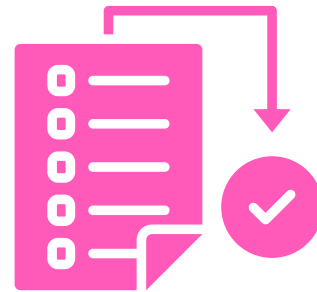


You don’t need a perfect roadmap, but you do need regular, structured alignment around what matters most.

2. Visibility about delivery

Leaders can’t guide what they can’t see. Strong delivery visibility means:

- Teams consistently get information they need to track and steer critical projects, even amid change
- Bottlenecks and risks are systematically identified and addressed early
- Communication flows upward and across teams, not just downward



Effective portfolio reviews, dashboards that drive conversation, and honest project health checks all create visibility that enables action.

3. Flexibility

Even with great plans, change is constant. The most effective organizations don’t try to avoid change - they build systems that flex with it. Flexible systems include:

- Escalation and decision paths that are lean, clear, and trusted
- Teams that know how to flag issues early and respond quickly
- Learning loops built into each project cycle to capture and apply lessons



This is about results, not bureaucracy

We can't afford stifling bureaucracy, so it is understandable that leaders may be leery of systems and structure. The right systems, however, liberate people to do their best work while adding good friction where it matters most. They give people clarity, focus, and a shared way to get work done. Without that balance, even your most capable people can end up spinning their wheels.

Bottom line: thriving teams and successful projects don't happen by accident. They're built on systems that guide work, support smart decisions, and enable people to perform at their best.

What systems are you tuning in your organization right now? I'd love to hear what's working for you.

I teach and consult about highly effective projects, portfolios, and teams. You can contact me at jeff@spspro.com and read more at spspro.com/blog.

About the Author



Jeff Oltmann

Oregon, USA



Jeff Oltmann helps organizations accelerate results through strategy deployment and project portfolio management. He consults, teaches, and leads forums for senior PMO leaders. He is principal at Synergy Professional Services (spspro.com) in Portland, Oregon and is on the faculty of the Division of Management at Oregon Health and Science University. He was previously on executive staff at IBM and is the founder of the Portfolio and Project Leaders Forum, a gathering of senior managers who lead project-based organizations (pplforum.org).

Jeff welcomes your questions and ideas. You can contact him at jeff@spspro.com or read previous articles at www.spspro.com/article-library.