QUESTLINE
Leading Progress

Is a *Misaligned* Project Culture Draining Energy & Sabotaging your Progress?

**Introducing the Questline *4 P's of Project Culture;*
A Framework to help Project Leaders
Influence and Strengthen
Project Culture**

Project Leadership is at a Crossroads

Project leaders today are facing an unprecedented challenge. As projects become increasingly technical, covering AI implementation and Digital Transformation, a critical question has emerged: should leadership focus their precious time and budget on the human aspect or double down on hard process and technical skills? Our experience, backed up by research shows that leaders are more likely to opt for the latter.

Here, and as part of our *Elevating Project Leadership* campaign, we constructively challenge project leaders and managers to rebalance their focus. While traditional hard, process driven skills remain important, the essential human-centric leadership skills that strengthen project culture have become the differentiator between project success and failure.

The Challenge with Culture

Culture can feel ambiguous and seem to encompass everything, making the harder more tangible skills more tempting to develop. Coupled with an industry-wide arms race to gain the latest technological accreditations, project leaders find themselves caught in a development gap, leaving them under-equipped for their most critical responsibility in this new world - to create the conditions for wider team success.

Our Response; The Project Culture Framework

We've developed the *Project Culture Framework* to help project leaders identify the specific levers they can use to influence culture beyond the obvious process heavy elements. This framework demonstartes how cultural alignment reduces project risk, increases success likelihood and highlights the positive impact leaders can have on their teams' overall performance.

The framework centers on four interactive, practical elements - the *'4P's'*:

- **Purpose**
- **Principles**
- **Processes**
- **People**

When *misaligned*, these elements can create friction that makes everything that little bit harder. Yet, when these four elements align, leaders and their teams can create the conditions for exceptional performance.

Many thanks for taking the time to engage and as always, we welcome constructive dialogue.

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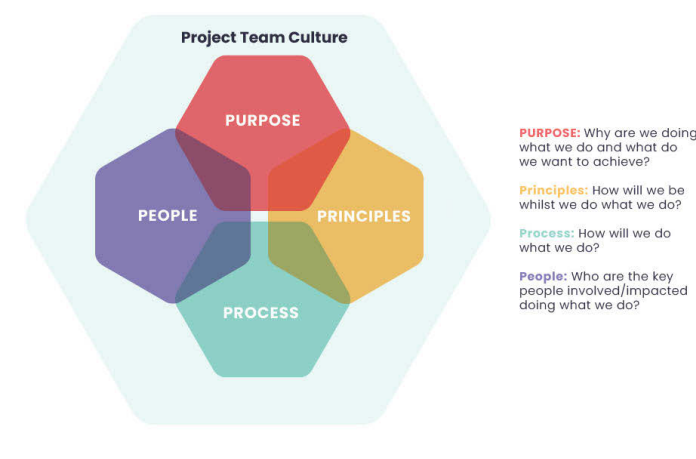
Project Culture as a Competitive Advantage

Deal and Kennedy (2000) recognise culture as *"The way things get done around here"* and whilst a 'strong' culture can be unique to specific teams, I tend to sum up a strong culture in one word; 'Aligned'. This is where you can *feel* the energy moving in the same direction, generally towards a common goal. Conversely, I define a 'misaligned' culture as one where energy and focus is diluted towards conflicting or competing objectives, making the overall mission feel harder - not impossible – just harder.

Rather than accepting culture as something that *'just happens'*, we encourage project leaders to actively influence culture and have identified the four levers that they can use to impact their team's culture.

The Questline *4 Ps of Project Culture* Framework

Project Team Culture

PURPOSE

PEOPLE — PRINCIPLES

PROCESS

PURPOSE: Why are we doing what we do and what do we want to achieve?

Principles: How will we be whilst we do what we do?

Process: How will we do what we do?

People: Who are the key people involved/impacted doing what we do?

Peter Drucker famously *(may not have)* said *"Culture eats Strategy for Breakfast"* and whilst whole-heartedly agreeing with the sentiment, we are showing that strategy can be seen as a sub-element (under *Purpose*) ensuring that culture remains the single biggest factor in Project success.

I recognise that creating and nurturing project culture is an ongoing evolving activity, one that Project Leaders in particular must continuously be alive to, rather than a one-off prescriptive process. Yet failing to get a handle on any single element will make the project more risky and therefore less likely to succeed.

Finally, one other important factor is to acknowledge the wider organisational culture. In my experience, projects have the added advantage of being able to create a strong project sub-culture. In an ideal world there would be perfect harmony but in practice, as long as the project is delivering value, then it can be left to develop organically (for better or for worse). If there are potential material impacts from the wider organisation or programme, they can be raised as a risks and escalated.

Now, let's delve into each element and highlight some key levers which will help Project Leaders move towards and maintain a strong aligned culture.

Purpose: Creating Shared Direction and Meaning

Although I mentioned that there is no prescription, we need a place to start, so as always, let's "Start with Why".
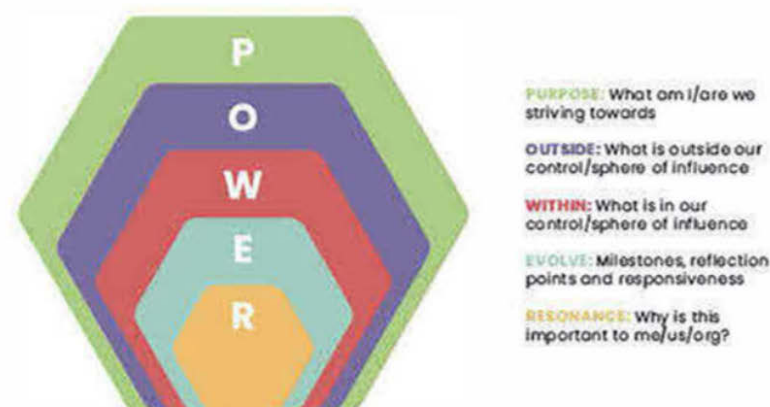
Purpose will define your direction of travel whilst *Resonance* helps you and the team understand your importance and the value of each activity within.

There's a lovely story of a NASA Janitor in the 1960's who was asked by the President before the successful Moon Missions "So what is your role here?" to which the Janitor responded, quick as a flash, "I'm helping put a man on the moon!"

At *Questline*, we use our **POWER** model to help tease out *Purpose* and *Resonance* as well as recognising what is inside our sphere of influence and what is not whilst identifying any natural milestones which will help us evolve towards our objective.

Of course, we're not forgetting *SMART* objectives - very sensible but lacking a little *oomph* in the *Resonance* department.

The Questline POWER Model

POWER

- **P**URPOSE: What am I/are we striving towards
- **O**UTSIDE: What is outside our control/sphere of influence
- **W**ITHIN: What is in our control/sphere of influence
- **E**VOLVE: Milestones, reflection points and responsiveness
- **R**ESONANCE: Why is this important to me/us/org?

The Questline **POWER** model is a neat tool to compliment the process of defining your project *Purpose* (what) and *Resonance* (why) and importantly, just like the NASA Janitor, the whole team can point to their contribution and regularly self-correct, including Project Leadership.

Q: Can your Project Leaders and teams define exactly what the project is trying to achieve?
Q: Can they define why it is important to the strategic direction of the organisation and the valuable role they play?
Q: Do your Project Leaders know *their* purpose and the value they add?

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Principles: Establishing the Team's Operating Values

Principles

- **Values**
- **Standards**
- **Guidelines**

How do we want to **BE**?

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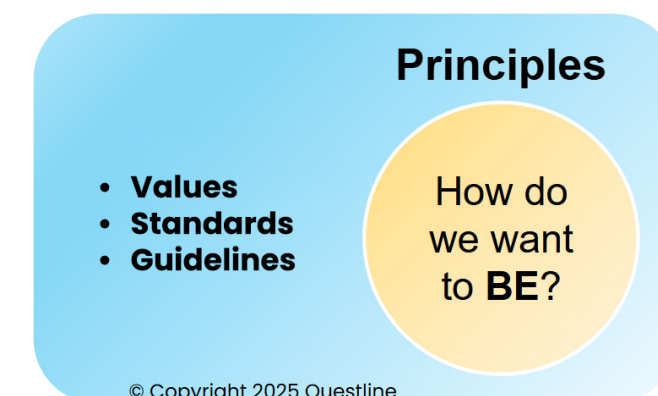
These are essentially the guidelines we can all subscribe to as a team which will help inform us as we move into the 'unknown' world of project delivery.

Ideally, *Principles* and *Values* will be congruent (at least not conflicting) with the wider organisation and programme. That said, they can exist separately as they will be influenced by the unique nature of the delivery mission.

So why are project *Principles* & *Values* so important? As humans, we all have personal principles and values, and even the most technologically advanced projects are still an inherently human activity. Therefore identifying and aligning with a clear set of principles sets the natural base framework for our culture.
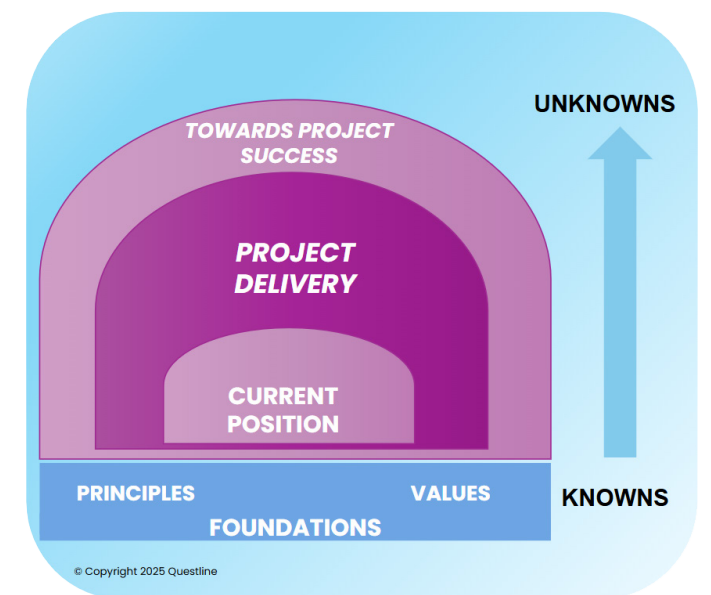
Having a clear *Principle* and *Value* framework is particularly important in times of pressure, acting as a familiar foundation from which to navigate the many unknowns of project delivery, providing that all important psychological safety to the team.

Similarly, if there are times when the team is deviating from the agreed framework, they offer a neutral

platform from which to discuss rationally as opposed to personally and emotionally.

Identifying *Principles* and *Values* is also a great exercise to bring new or growing teams together to forge *Collaboration* as well as helping to refine aligned *Processes*, which we'll cover later.

Finally, as a Project Leader, knowing your personal principles and values can help develop *Emotional Intelligence* (more on that later too...).

UNKNOWNS

TOWARDS PROJECT SUCCESS

PROJECT DELIVERY

CURRENT POSITION

PRINCIPLES   VALUES
FOUNDATIONS   KNOWNS

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Q: Do you have documented Team Values or Guiding Principles?

If not then a great place to start is your organisational values which are likely published on your company or clients' website. Aligning with these ensures congruency and can offer a neat nucleus from which to evolve.

Q: Are your Project leaders aware of their personal values and principles?

Processes: How do we want to Do This?

There are literally hundreds of micro-processes within a project and a similar number of methodologies and approaches claiming to be the efficiency silver-bullet. Here is not the place to advocate for one or the other yet one thing we at *Questline* subscribe to is that some level of *Agility* is effective.

Agility has become an organisational asptiation with roots in the 1990's Rapid Software Development revolution. One of its most culturally powerful principles is **maximising the amount of work not done**; ie, only doing work that directly links to valuable outcomes (neatly described in our **POWER** model).

Agility also embraces an evolutionary, emergent approach; that is, we cannot hope know everything at the project initiation so we proceed and learn as we go, following value and treating inevitable change as an opportunity.

How does this impact Culture?

Efficiency: We only exlore what's required to deliver the most value - avoiding work done out of habit, pursuing shiny but less valuable activites or missing opportunities due to changing requirements.

Sustainability: We avoid trying to 'boil the ocean' and constantly delaying delivery, inevitably draining team motivation, good-will and budget. Instead we create, smaller, natural increments and encourages live collaborative prototypes and MVPs which front-load value and ROI whilst building momentum, buy-in and trust.

Processes encompass risk and budget management, planning, requirement and feature management and governance and using these levers can also help align these towards our goals or at least highlight ineffcent areas.

Finally, technology and not least *AI* can be a great enabler in this area although not at the expense of the wider elements.

Q: So are your deliverables too big - can you break down into bite-sized chunks and lock down a clear MVP?
Q: Can you include natural, regular milestones (eg 2 weeks) collaboratively checking on understanding, priority and value?

Our *Project Culture Radar* is now available at www.questlineglobal.com

People: The Critical Success Factor

Finally, on to the most important element of Project Culture which is of course the *People*. It is *People* who live and experience 'the Culture' so it is no surprise to see that *People* are intertwined with all our other elements.
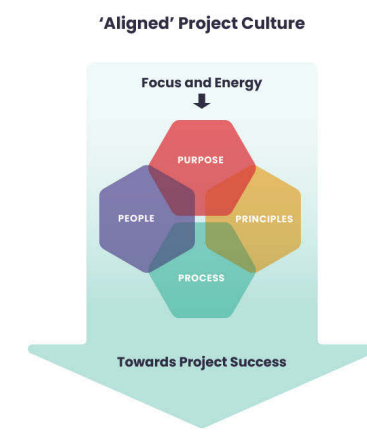

We consider *People* to include Project Leadership (which is often overlooked) and ask what is the most important lever *Leaders* can pull to strengthen culture?

Emotional Intelligence is the ability to recognise the difference between an *emotional* response and a rational response which, in the dynamic world of project delivery, is an extraordinary skill to possess. We see *this* as the single biggest lever at the Project Leader's disposal.

Self Awareness is the gateway to *Emotional Intelligence,* allowing clarity in understanding how certain situations can *Impact* their own behaviour and offering a choice on response.

With this understanding, the ability to relate to and understand other team members and stakeholders can help build relationships and foster collaboration (which we will touch upon next).

The good news is that *Emotional Intelligence* is a learned and honed skill which, if leaders are given time to regularly step back and work on, can develop alongside other more process centric skills.
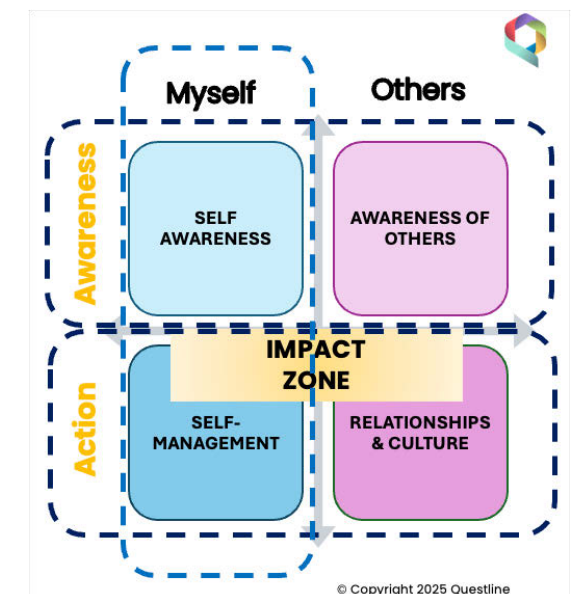
Q: Are your Project Leaders given the time and space to work on their own *Emotional Intelligence* and *Self Awareness*?

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People: Collaboration as the Foundation of Progress

As we consider what, alongside *Emotional Intelligence* can have the biggest influence on the wider project community and culture it is useful to offer a definition:

Project: A collaborative or individual enterprise that is carefully planned to achieve a particular aim | *Oxford English Dictionary*

So, by definition, organisational projects could not be projects without collaboration and we believe that this is the single most important barometer of a strong, aligned project culture. Collaboration can boost the other elements; it can lead to greater clarity of *Purpose*, it can lead to stronger *Principles* and *Values* and improved *Processes* as well as having a positive effect on the motivation of the team.
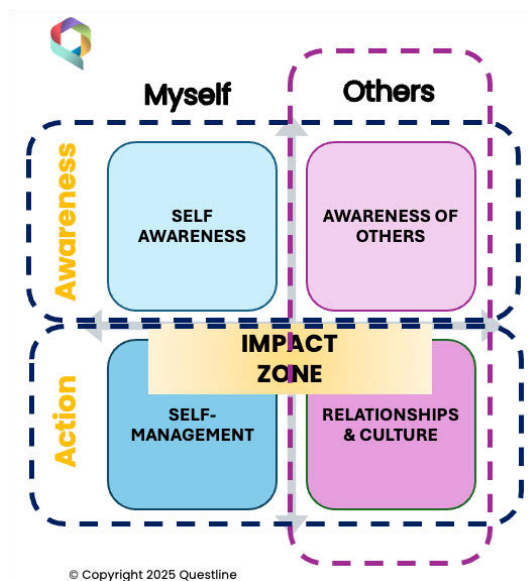
Collaboration can be added as one of your *Principles* or *Values* and amplified through identifying them. Regular refinement of the *Process* element through consistent contact with the technical and business teams to determine business value also forges inherent collaboration. This is where the interlinking, holistic nature of Culture is brought into full focus.

Collaboration will look different in organisations and teams especially with the distributed, global nature of many initiatives yet there are some indicators that immediately spring to mind.

Q: **Are your Leaders promoting *Collaboration* through:**

- **Reducing work in *hard* silos to maximise cross pollination of ideas?**
- **Promoting regular, collective feedback?**
- **Working with the business to respond to changing requirements, priorities and value?**
- **An openness to continual improvement?**

Our *Project Culture Radar* is now available at www.questlineglobal.com

# Managing Risk through an Aligned Culture

Summing up, we have shown the '4 P's' of Project Culture and given a whistlestop tour of their meaning - so what can we conclude?

Let's look at this through the lens all Project Professionals will understand – RISK.

A project leader's role is to make project delivery more likely. They do this by *identifying, managing, mitigating and communicating risk.*

If project leadership focusses too closely on any single element, for example *Process* (where budget, planning and feature management typically sit), they are potentially missing large sources of Risk.

Below, we see a strong *'Aligned'* culture versus a *'Misaligned'* project culture – which one is less risky and therefore more likely to deliver?
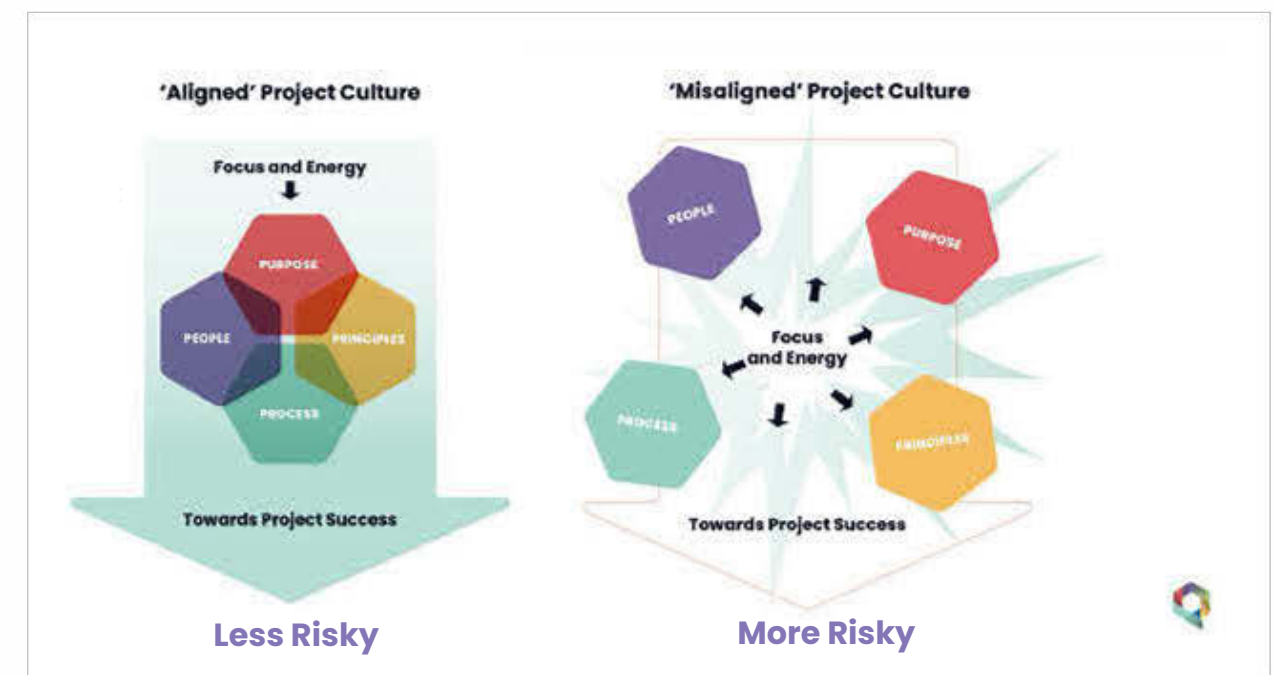
Project Leaders can continue to go with the flow or they can choose to *affect* the flow recognising that they represent the largest influence on the Project Culture. In our work we sum this up as *IMPACT:*

IMPACT: *To have a strong effect or influence on a situation or a person* Cambridge Dictionary

Project Leaders need to remain alive to Risk across *all* elements of culture and above all, the *People* and, therein, lies our simple **call to action**:

Organisations must continue to support their Project Leaders in developing vital People-Centred Leadership skills

Post Script...

As part of our *Elevating Project Leadership* campaign. we are on a mission to *set a new standard for People-Centred Leadership Development and Support for your Project Leaders.*

We believe that Project Leaders are not getting the same level of Leadership Development and Support than their non-project peers in the organisation. Recognising there are genuine reasons for this, we want to constructively engage, highlight and overcome these barriers and this culture framework is designed to help with that.

We have also developed the **Project Culture Radar** to accompany this framework which will help Leaders quickly identify potential sources of *Risk* relating to culture and this is available to download on our website.

In the mean-time we are looking forward to continuing the conversation with you.

Best Wishes

Anthony

Managing Partner

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July 2025
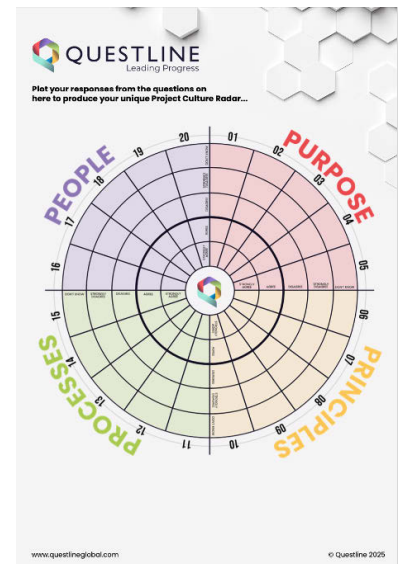

[The Project Culture RADAR](#)

Further Reading

Corporate Cultures: *The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*, Deal and Kennedy (2000)
Start with Why, Simon SInek (2009)
Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman (1995)
Rapid Application Development, James Martin (1991)
Original Agile Manifesto: www.agilemanifesto.org

Questline exists to help your Leaders strengthen culture, create more impact and make more progress through specialist Human-Centric Leadership Development and Support Partnerships.

Continue the conversation with us today at www.questlineglobal.com and take the first steps on your Leadership Development journey...