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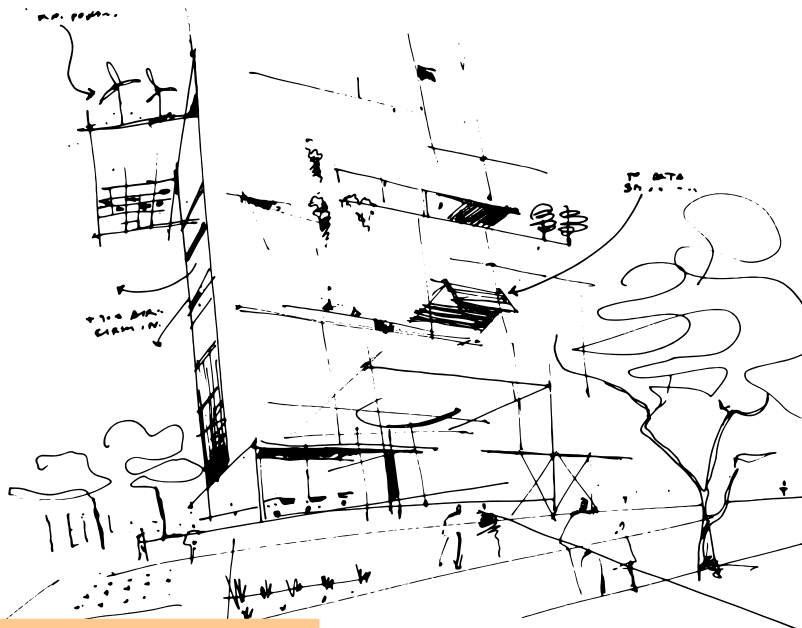
Challenging today.
Reinventing tomorrow.

PROGRAM PERSPECTIVES

What are leaders of the most successful programs doing that others aren't?

How culture, alignment and leadership determine program success

PROGRAM PERSPECTIVES



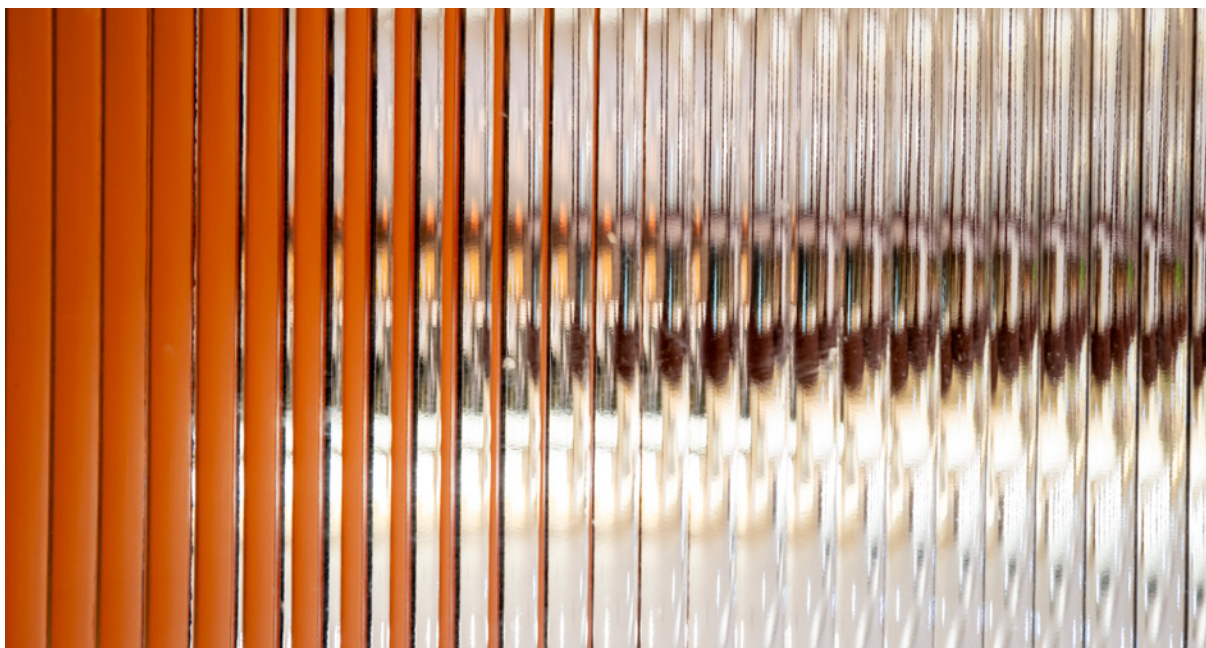
Ask anyone who has led a complex program what keeps them up at night and the answer is rarely the schedule or the budget.

It's the feeling that something is shifting beneath the surface, that teams are pulling in different directions, that decisions are being made without a shared compass. We've been in those rooms. We've also seen the opposite: environments where stakeholder alignment runs deep and leadership holds steady under pressure.

At a time when the nature of work itself is becoming more fluid, digital and augmented by AI, the early conditions of a program are increasingly important. Risk can emerge early on if performance and human conditions are treated as an output of good management rather than an input, culture emerges unintentionally, alignment is assumed or leadership capability is presumed to follow technical seniority and experience.

Across our more than 200 complex programs delivered globally, what has become clear is making assumptions is among the costliest mistakes a program can make. Fostering a proactive culture that is intentional and continually reinforced contributes directly to cost-effective and efficient delivery.

The programs that consistently perform aren't always the best resourced or the most technically sophisticated. They are the ones where leadership and culture work together to sustain stakeholder alignment, connecting clients, communities and supply chain with the broader purpose and keeping that connection strong when things get difficult.



What the data reveals

Research covering over 16,000 major infrastructure investments across 136 countries since 1910, found that 91.5 percent ran over budget, over schedule or both.¹ A systemic pattern, persisting despite decades of investment in better tools, governance, data and industry learning. The missing link is often the connection between leadership and culture, which determines whether those investments translate into better outcomes.

Large infrastructure programs are complex, cross-organizational transformations requiring sustained alignment, shared ownership and behavioral change across fragmented stakeholder ecosystems. They face the same leadership and adoption challenges that shape corporate transformations.

McKinsey's organizational research identifies the cause of such challenges:

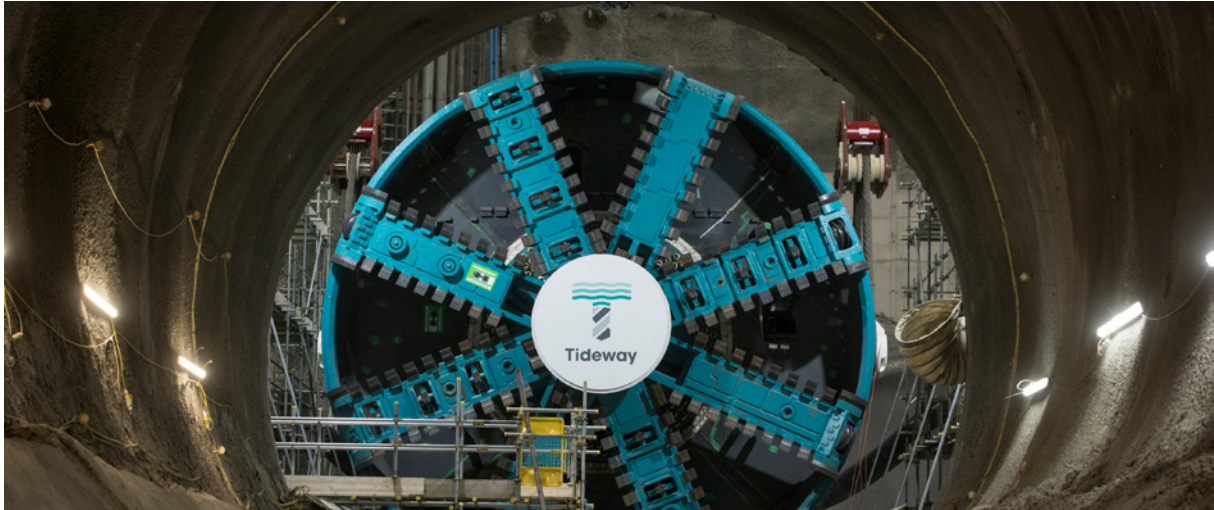
72 percent of major transformations fail

because leadership doesn't fully support the change or because people across the organization resist it.²

In program terms, governance structures get created without being owned, strategies are documented without being internalized and accountability is distributed across complex ecosystems weakening stakeholder alignment and quietly dissolves under pressure. By the time a program looks like it has an execution problem, it's almost always linked to a long-term leadership or culture problem.

1. Flyvbjerg, B. et al. Research covering 16,000+ major infrastructure investments across 136 countries. Cited in Flyvbjerg, B. (2014). What You Should Know About Megaprojects and Why: An Overview. Project Management Journal, Vol. 45, No. 2. https://www.pmi.org/-/media/pmi/documents/public/pdf/research/research-summaries/flyvbjerg_megaprojects.pdf

2. McKinsey and Company. The State of Organizations 2023. McKinsey and Company, 2023. <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/business%20functions/people%20and%20organizational%20performance/our%20insights/the%20state%20of%20organizations%202023/the-state-of-organizations-2023.pdf>



Creating a culture of alignment

Culture is fundamental to program success. It shapes how people make decisions, raise problems and collaborate across organizational boundaries. Genuine alignment means that at every level, people understand how their contribution connects to program goals and reinforces the program vision. They share a common frame of reference for making good decisions independently, without escalating every trade-off to the top, strengthening alignment across the program.

Research consistently shows that trust-based environments outperform command-and-control models across productivity, retention and innovation³ Trust and psychological safety ensure every voice counts while encouraging diversity of thought and reducing the risk of groupthink. Teams that feel supported will surface problems early. Teams that don't will manage them quietly until they become crises..

A clear vision with genuine meaning is one of the most powerful alignment tools available to a program leader — a north star that guides decisions at every level.

Take, for example, the Thames Tideway Tunnel, which delivered over three acres of new public space along the River Thames. The program's guiding vision — reconnecting London with the river — gave thousands of people across a complex delivery ecosystem a shared purpose. The program created more than 4,000 direct, sustainable jobs, established over 150 apprenticeships and generated an estimated \$129 million in social value. It also transformed approaches to safety leadership across the industry, an outcome reflected by deliberate leadership on both sides. The client-side program director created the conditions for the entire supply chain to succeed, and that kind of leadership capability is as important to shaping strong program culture.

3. McKinsey Organizational Health Index. McKinsey and Company, 2022. <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/organizational-health-is-still-the-key-to-long-term-performance>

Culture is a delivery decision

Culture in complex programs should be deliberately designed early and with the same intent that goes into governance frameworks and delivery plans. When leadership doesn't make that investment, it can lead to siloed working, deferred decisions and the quiet management of problems rather than open resolution.

The U.K.'s National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority assessed major government programs against a traffic light rating system and classified 42 percent as at risk or in serious difficulty, with governance weaknesses and inadequate planning among the primary causes.⁴ What sits beneath most of those weaknesses is a lack of cohesive culture, one where accountability was established with insufficient clarity.

These are the conditions that determine whether a program has everything it takes to succeed. We've seen the alternative on programs like TEAM2100, the U.K.'s flood protection program for the Thames Estuary. From the outset, the program set a clear ambition to become a world-class asset management organization within a 10-year remit. External specialists from Australia's water sector were recruited to accelerate program-wide learning. The result was a fundamentally improved approach to asset management, a focus on safe and sustainable delivery and a program that became a pathfinder in the industry. It was compliant with ISO 44001 Collaborative Business Relationship Management under Jacobs' accreditation, achieved ISO 55001 Asset Management certification and drove improved standards in safety leadership, innovation and leadership capability across the sector. That outcome was delivered by a leadership team that treated culture and accountability with the same rigor as the technical system.



4. Infrastructure and Projects Authority / National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority. Annual Report 2023-24. UK Government, January 2025. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/infrastructure-and-projects-authority-annual-report-2023-24/infrastructure-and-projects-authority-annual-report-2023-24-html>

The digital environment is shaping culture

In an artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled environment, culture matters more. What's changing is not just the tools programs use, but the nature of work itself. AI is compressing decision cycles, increasing the volume of available insight and removing many of the transactional tasks that once structured delivery environments. This makes alignment more critical.

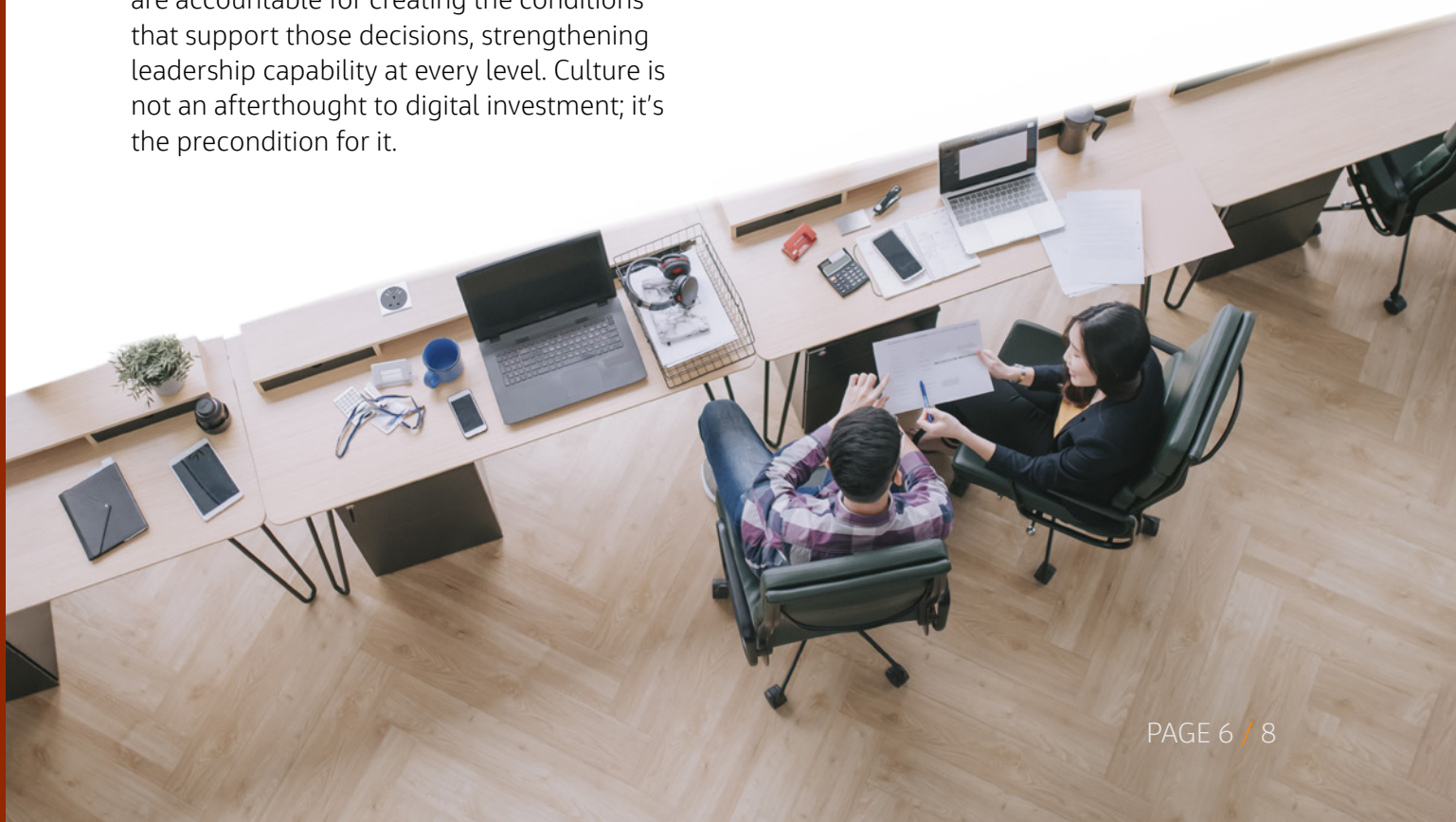
In environments where purpose and priorities are clear, AI accelerates capability and teams move faster in the same direction. In environments where those conditions are absent, AI accelerates the rate at which teams diverge. This is where adaptive leadership becomes critical. The limiting factor is no longer access to information, but the ability of leaders to create shared context at scale.

The most effective programs are those where advanced tools are used to make informed decisions in an environment where emotional intelligence is as important as analytical capability. Technology amplifies its environment. In an aligned program, better data accelerates good decisions and leaders are accountable for creating the conditions that support those decisions, strengthening leadership capability at every level. Culture is not an afterthought to digital investment; it's the precondition for it.

From alignment to adaptability

Alignment has traditionally been about consistency, ensuring that teams move together in service of a defined plan. Increasingly, however, the challenge is not just alignment to a plan, but alignment through change. Major programs now operate in conditions where assumptions shift mid-delivery: supply chains reconfigure, technologies evolve, policy settings change and stakeholder expectations move in real time. In that context, alignment becomes a dynamic capability.

The role of leadership is no longer just to create clarity at a point in time, but to continually re-establish it as conditions change. Adaptive leadership recognizes that alignment is not a one-time achievement but an ongoing responsibility. Programs that struggle are often those that achieved alignment once and assumed it would hold. Programs that perform treat alignment as something that must be actively maintained, recalibrated and reinforced throughout delivery.





What the best program leaders do differently

Leaders on programs that genuinely perform share a core competency — leadership, culture and accountability are treated with the same importance. They understand that clarity of purpose, quality of accountability and strength of culture are inputs to good program management, and they invest in them from the very start. Strong program leadership begins with that investment.

They also understand that a program's culture is largely set in its very early stages. The behaviors and standards established early usually persist long after pressure arrives. Getting it right from the outset is far less costly than reconstructing it under pressure. The organizations building this kind of institutional capability aren't just delivering better programs. They're developing leaders who carry that capability forward, extending the impact of strong program leadership from one program to another.

**Culture is a capability.
In our experience
it's often the most
consequential one on
a major program.**

Build it deliberately and its value grows with every decision it informs, every problem it surfaces early and every moment of pressure it helps a team absorb. Leave it to chance and the program pays for it, in delays, in rework, in the cost of rebuilding trust under pressure.

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Program perspectives is a monthly series from Jacobs, sharing insight from across our global program management community

NEXT ISSUE:

The programs that succeed start differently

Why initiation is the highest-leverage decision a program makes.

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Published July 2026

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