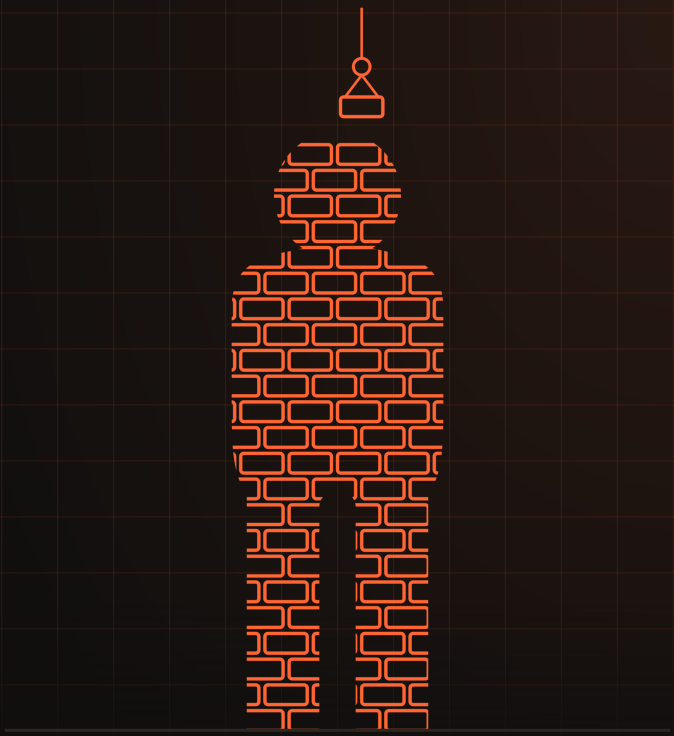
Constructing Culture



BUILT, NOT BADGED

Going for Gold.

CONSTRUCTING PROJECT MANAGERS

The craft of building jobs that finish early.

ANDY PRITCHARD

MCIOB · CIOB GOLD MEDAL, CONSTRUCTION MANAGER OF THE YEAR

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Constructing Culture

Going for Gold

CONSTRUCTING PROJECT MANAGERS

Notes from twenty two years of building jobs that finish, for the people still building them.

Constructing Culture Ltd
Second edition, July 2026.
This book collects and reworks writing first published on LinkedIn and at constructing-culture.co.uk between February and July 2026. Every statistic in it is sourced in the original articles on the site, and most of them deserve to be checked, so please do.
You are welcome to share this book, quote it, and argue with it. If you use a piece of it, say where it came from. That is the open loop working.
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What's in here

Acknowledgements

There is one name on the cover of this book, and it took a lot more than one person to earn it.

To Ian, Neville, Roger and Russell, who trusted me to lead substantial projects in my mid twenties, and to take full ownership, under their guidance, of the programmes that started this learning journey.

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To every trainee, engineer, building manager, planner and trade partner who did the actual building on the jobs behind these pages. The stories in here are yours as much as mine, including the ones where I got it wrong.

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And most of all to Cat, my wonderful wife, who has encouraged and supported the articles, the book and the launch of a whole new business in the space of eight months. None of this happens without her.

Whatever is useful in here came from the people above. The mistakes are mine, and I have left them in, because they are the credible part.

FOREWORD

A hand round the collar

Why this book exists, and how to read it.

When I was eighteen, a few months into my first job on site, I had a good idea. We had a logistics problem, and in a client workshop I offered a solution. The client loved it. I walked out buzzing.

My site manager caught me by the collar and told me, in words I will leave out, never to come up with a solution again without giving it to him first, so he could present it as his own.

That was my introduction to how our industry leads people. And for a long stretch of my career, I became him.

Years later I was running a college reclad. I had a talented building manager who was desperate to own his own building, and would have done it well. I would not let him. I was determined to write every programme myself. The job slipped. The quality suffered. I was taken off the project, and it cost me a promotion and about a year of my career. Taking me off was the right call.

Around then I had a 360 appraisal. It was hard to read and completely accurate. A friend asked me why I was a harder person at work than I was anywhere else. I did not have a good answer. So I changed. I stopped telling people what to do and started teaching them why, so they could decide for themselves on site. I gave people real ownership of their work, down to trainees. And I made the same deal with every team since: do something well and the directors hear your name. Get it wrong and it is on me, and it stays on site.

The medal came later. The credibility is in the failures, not the wins.

This book is everything I have worked out since, written down. It started life as a series of articles and posts, and people kept asking for it

in one place. So here it is, in one place, tightened up and put in the right order.

A note on how to read it. Part one is the diagnosis: why the industry keeps walking into the same hole, and what it costs. Part two is the craft: how a job is actually planned to finish, which almost nobody teaches. Part three is the culture: why good businesses cannot see their own problems, and what changes when they can. Part four is Monday morning.

You can read it front to back in an evening, or dip into whichever chapter is currently costing you money. Every chapter ends with something you can do this week without asking anyone's permission. None of it needs new software, and most of it is free.

One warning before you start. Almost nothing in this book is complicated. That is the uncomfortable part. The industry's problem was never that the answers are hard. It is that the culture stops us using them.

01 The hole we keep walking into

The central facts of UK construction, the money they burn, and the reason thirty years of reports have not moved them.

01

PART ONE · THE PROBLEM

Two questions at an induction

The most important thing I ever learned about construction, I learned in ten minutes, in a site induction room in South London.

0.2 percent.

That is the proportion of major projects that come in on time, on budget, and deliver the benefits they were supposed to deliver. The figure comes from a study of just over three thousand projects by the Saïd Business School at Oxford. Almost everything else in the dataset finished late, came in over budget, or under-delivered. Often all three.

That is not a fringe statistic. It is the central fact of UK construction, and it has not improved meaningfully in decades. Productivity has grown 0.4 percent a year since 2000 while manufacturing grew at 3. Avoidable error costs the sector between ten and twenty five billion pounds a year. Construction insolvencies are the highest of any industry. And roughly 700 people working in construction trades take their own lives each year, almost four times the national average.

These are not separate problems. They are symptoms of one structural problem the industry has spent twenty years declining to look at honestly. And the best way I can show you what it is, is to tell you about an induction room.

Same people, ten minutes apart

A few years ago I was running a £22m school build in South London. Seven sectional completions, 193 rooms, a programme our own senior

leadership would not sign off because they thought it was too tight. We finished six weeks early.

At every induction on that project, before we showed any worker anything, we asked them two questions. *Why do you do quality work? Who do you do it for?*

The answers were unanimous. So I don't get fired. For the money. More work. Green cards. Transactional. Disconnected. Honest.

Then we showed them a short film of the children who would use the school, and the headteacher who had waited years for it. We asked the same two questions again.

Kids' futures. When we walk away it's safe. The community. Everyone.

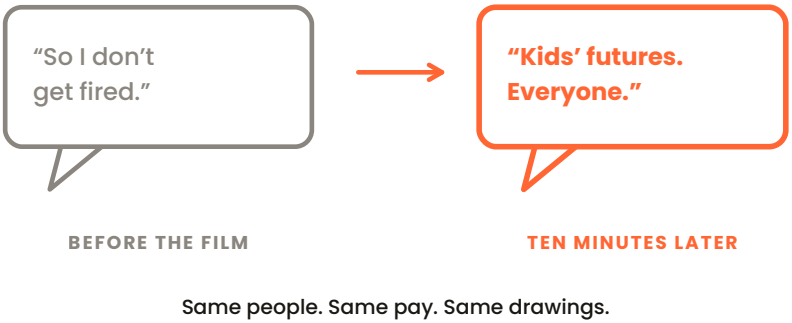

FIG. 1 — THE INDUCTION ROOM. WHAT CHANGED WAS WHAT THEY THOUGHT THEY WERE BUILDING.

Same people. Ten minutes apart. Same skills, same pay, same drawings. What changed was what they thought they were building. And it changed how they built it.

At the end of every induction we asked one more question. *What could we do better?* Over a thousand answers came back during the project. A third of them said the same thing.

Say thank you.

Not better tools. Not more money. Not clearer drawings or a nicer canteen. The single most common request, from experienced trades who had worked on every site in London, was basic human acknowledgement.

It was never an information problem

The default assumption in construction is that the answers come from above. Better systems. Better tools. Better governance. A new framework, a new platform, a new ISO. That assumption is wrong, and the induction room is the proof.

The knowledge to fix construction has always been on construction sites. The good practice exists. The information is there. The people who know what is wrong already work for you.

What stops you using it is the culture. The rest of this book is about exactly that: what the culture problem looks like up close, what it costs by the week, and the craft and the leadership that change it. But hold on to the induction room as you read, because every chapter comes back to it in the end. The answers were in the room the whole time. Somebody just had to ask, and mean it.

Do it Monday

At your next induction, ask the two questions before anyone sees a drawing: why do you do quality work, and who do you do it for? Write the answers down. Then show them what the building is for, and ask again.

And start collecting answers to the third question: what could we do better? Read them weekly. Act on one, visibly, every week. Then say thank you, by name.

02

PART ONE · THE PROBLEM

The craft nobody teaches

Planning is the number one named cause of delay in UK construction. So where are all the courses that teach it?

Ask construction people what causes delay, and they tell you the same thing they have told every survey for the last decade. Not the weather. Not money. Not a difficult client. The plan.

In a 2022 industry survey, 31 percent named poor original planning and unrealistic scheduling as the number one reason projects run late. It was the top answer in 2016 too. Nothing had moved. And it is not just what people feel. When the Get It Right Initiative and CITB tracked avoidable error across 25 live UK projects worth nearly a billion pounds, inadequate planning was, in their words, by far the biggest cause. Roughly 71 of the 93 million pounds of error they headed off traced back to the plan. Three quarters of the waste.

So here is a fair question. If planning is the number one thing that goes wrong, the training market must be full of courses that teach a project manager how to plan a job that actually finishes on time.

I have read that market the way a delivery person reads it, rather than the way a brochure does. It is not full of those courses. It has barely got any.

What we actually train project managers to do

There is no shortage of project management training in this country. Professional qualifications, chartered routes, master's degrees, executive

programmes, software courses, contract schools. The trouble is what almost all of it teaches.

The flagship qualification most PMs hold is assessed by exam questions that ask candidates to describe, explain and outline. Its own syllabus states the exam will not require any calculations to be performed. It tests whether you can talk fluently about governance and life cycles. It does not, and is not trying to, test whether you can sequence a real job and drive it to a finish. The chartered routes confirm you know the profession through written submissions and an interview. The master's degrees are, by their own module descriptions, management principles and theory. The software schools teach the tool, not the thinking. And the commercial and claims providers, tellingly, teach planning as a defensive art, building the record for the dispute everyone assumes is coming.

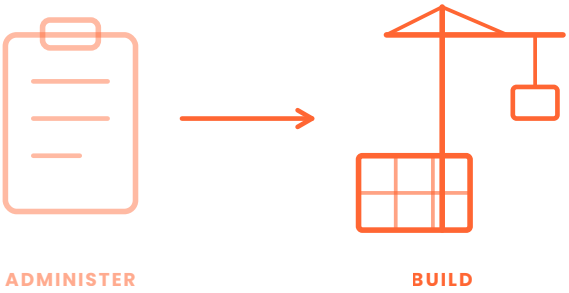

FIG. 2 — AN ENTIRE PROFESSION REWARDED FOR DESCRIBING PROJECTS. ALMOST NONE OF IT ASKS YOU TO PROVE YOU CAN FINISH ONE.

Line it all up and the pattern is hard to miss. We have built a profession that rewards people for being able to describe a project, assessed by

exam, essay and interview, and almost none of it asks them to prove they can finish one.

To be fair to the thing I am criticising: the generic frameworks were never designed to teach site craft, and that is a reasonable division of labour. The certificate was always meant to sit on top of experience, not replace it. Which is the real problem, and it is sharper than blaming any one course.

> **We have started to mistake the certificate for the craft.**

We promote the person with the qualification and assume the delivery ability comes attached. It does not. A certificate is a photograph of knowledge. The craft is the thing moving in the room, and we stopped teaching it on purpose somewhere along the way.

The knowledge that walks out the door on Friday

Bent Flyvbjerg, who has studied more failed projects than almost anyone alive, keeps returning to an old idea: the master builder, whose judgement was earned through long experience. He calls it practical wisdom, and his point is that it cannot be downloaded. It is built, slowly, by doing the work.

I know that kind of knowledge exists because I have spent twenty two years building it. Fifteen years on sites, twenty three projects from five to forty million pounds, then running the planning function for an entire interiors business. At one point I wrote the planning strategy for that business myself, one version for NEC and one for JCT, and retrained the whole delivery community in it, around fifty project managers and senior

building managers. Not one page of what I taught them came off a shelf. There was no shelf.

That is the real gap. The knowledge that finishes jobs early is not missing from this industry. It is sitting in the heads of a few thousand experienced people, and it walks out of the door every Friday in the minds of those about to retire. We pass it on by accident, if at all, to whoever happens to be standing next to the right person at the right time. For something this expensive to get wrong, that is a remarkable way to run a profession.

The hopeful part is simple. A craft that can be described can be taught. The only reason it has not been is that the people who can do it have been too busy doing it to write it down. The middle of this book is my attempt to write it down.

Do it Monday

Look at the gap between your best project manager and your average one. It is rarely a gap in qualifications; they often hold the same certificates. Name what the best one actually does differently, in writing, in plain language. That document is the start of your own syllabus.

Then pair them. Not a mentoring scheme on a poster: one hour a week, the good one talking through their live programme decisions out loud, the other one asking why.

03

PART ONE · THE PROBLEM

What a week actually costs

The industry's own numbers, in one place. Worth reading before anyone in your business calls a buffer a luxury.

Every argument in this book eventually collides with the same objection: we cannot afford the time to do it properly. So before we go any further, let us price the alternative.

Start with how often it happens. 42 percent of UK projects ran over time across the last full national measurement period. Late is not the exception in this industry. It is closer to the house style. And when professionals are asked to name the cause, the answer, year after year, is poor original planning.

Now the leak. The Get It Right Initiative puts avoidable error at 10 to 25 percent of project value. Not disasters. Rework, clashes, and quiet mistakes absorbed as if they were normal business. Set that against what is left at the bottom of the account: the average pre-tax margin across the UK Top 100 contractors is 2.4 percent. Forty three of them made less than 2 percent and sixteen lost money. Error alone consumes roughly twice the industry's profit, before a single dispute is priced.

And the disputes come. 73 percent of UK adjudications include a claim for extension of time. It is the single most common thing we fight about. The most recent King's College London study with the Adjudication Society found the two leading causes of disputes were inadequate contract administration, named by half of respondents, and a plain lack of competence among the people involved. These are not bad luck problems. They are capability problems wearing a legal costume.

Your number

Here is the piece that turns all of that from wallpaper into a decision. Using our cost-of-a-week model, one week of delay costs roughly £20,000 on a £5m job, £32,000 on a £10m, £51,000 on a £20m, and £174,000 on a £100m. Typically 0.17 to 0.40 percent of contract value, every week the job runs past its date.

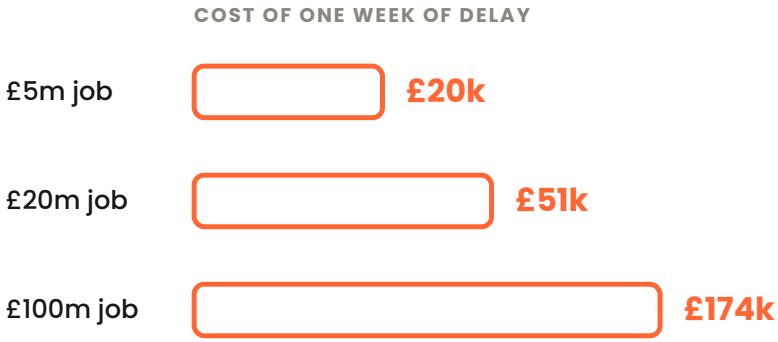

FIG. 3 — THE COST OF ONE WEEK OF DELAY, BY JOB SIZE. SCALE IT TO YOUR TURNOVER.

Now do the uncomfortable sum. Count last year's late weeks, across every job, and multiply. That is the prize sitting inside delivery, before you buy a single thing cheaper, before you win a single extra tender. For most contractors it is the largest untouched number in the business.

The weeks can be bought back. That is what the rest of this book is for.

Keep your number in mind as you read part two. The buffer, the live programme, the recovery discipline: none of them are planning niceties. They are the mechanics of buying those weeks back, and the maths

works in reverse. A £22m school handed over six weeks and one day early is the same sum, pointed the other way.

Do it Monday

Work out your own cost of a week: prelims, plus liquidated damages exposure, plus the overhead of the team stuck on the job instead of the next one. Put it on one page. Then count last year's late weeks and multiply.

Take the result to your next board meeting and ask one question: what are we spending, this year, to buy those weeks back?

04

PART ONE · THE PROBLEM

The recorder is switched off

I have an irrational fear of flying. It taught me more about construction than any report ever has.

I lose sleep in the days before a flight. The dread of the journey home can ruin the last few days of a holiday. I know the fear makes no sense, and that is the part worth sitting with. Because flying is one of the safest things a human being can do, and it is safe for one reason: aviation does the exact opposite of what my industry does with failure.

When an aircraft has a serious incident, a sequence kicks in that construction would not recognise. A protected recorder is recovered. Independent investigators examine what happened. The people involved are encouraged to report what they saw, protected from punishment for honest mistakes. Then the lesson is written up and published, so every operator in the world learns from one crew's worst day.

That is an open loop. Failure goes in, learning comes out, and the same mistake gets harder to make twice.

Construction runs the opposite system. When a job goes wrong, the instinct is to find out whose fault it is, protect the position, and keep it quiet. The records that exist are built for the dispute, not for the lesson. The settlement comes with a confidentiality clause. The insurer says admit nothing. So the knowledge of what actually went wrong never leaves the room it happened in, and the next team, on the next job, walks into the same hole.

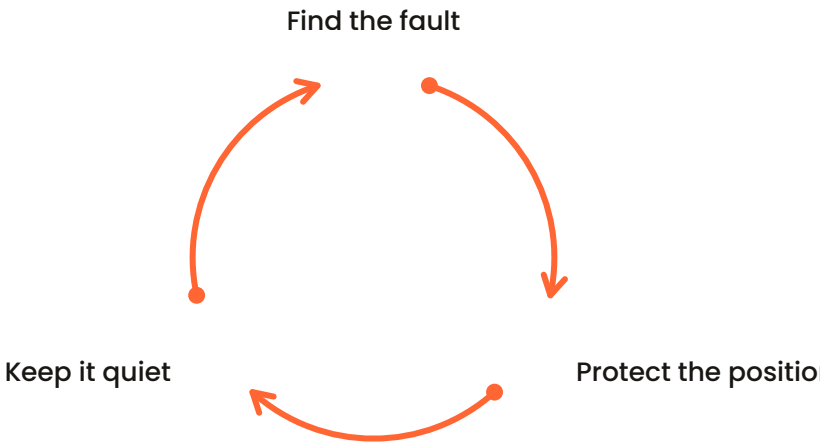

FIG. 4 — THE CLOSED LOOP. FIND THE FAULT, PROTECT THE POSITION, KEEP IT QUIET. REPEAT.

You can see how closed the loop is by trying to find the data. Safety is the one area where failure is partly on the public record, and even there the HSE's own estimate is that only around half of reportable injuries are actually reported. Move off safety and the shutters come down. Delay and commercial loss is almost entirely confidential, well over two thousand adjudication referrals a year, private by design. There is no public database of building defects at all. The domains where the money is actually lost are exactly the domains where almost nothing is learned in the open. We are flying with the recorder switched off.

Where I changed my mind

I used to think the answer was simply to be braver. To publish what went wrong, the way aviation does. I no longer expect that, and I will not ask for it. When a job goes wrong, sharing what happened means handing

over evidence. The litigation culture makes admitting a mistake an act of self-harm. It will not happen, and I understand exactly why.

But there is a door that is not locked.

Sharing a mistake invites blame. Sharing a solution invites adoption.

A company that buries a mistake protects only itself. A company that shares a solution helps everyone and risks nothing, because a good answer carries no liability. It is the same learning, pointed the opposite way.

And we already know it works. CROSS-UK, the confidential reporting system for structural and fire safety, is modelled directly on aviation: reports stripped of anything identifying, expert analysis added, lessons published with nobody named. It works. It just stops at safety. And when a voluntary scheme started publishing how quickly large firms actually paid their supply chain, average payment times fell by weeks. Nothing changed but visibility.

It starts in your own site cabin

You do not need an institution to start this. The same loop runs at the scale of a single project, and it is built entirely from how the people in charge react when someone brings them bad news. The moment you shout at the person who tells you a job is slipping is the moment they stop telling you. The same fear that stops a labourer flagging a hazard stops a project manager telling a director the truth about a programme.

So be the person your partners come to first looking for a shared solution, not the person they build a claim against. React well to bad

news and you keep hearing it while it is still cheap to fix. That is systematic learning at the smallest scale, and it is where it has to begin.

Do it Monday

Take the best solution your business found last year, the fix, not the failure that caused it, and share it. In your next partner meeting, on your company page, anywhere. Watch what it costs you: nothing. Watch what comes back.

Inside your own walls, run the honest version: one hour, one recent failure, no names, one question. What would have to be true for this not to happen again?

02 The craft

How a job is actually planned to finish early. The discipline the qualifications skip, written down.

05

PART TWO · THE CRAFT

Two kinds of planning

Most project managers are taught to plan for the argument, not the finish. Most of us never noticed we were being taught it.

It is rarely said out loud, but it is how the industry behaves. We build the programme, then we spend the job defending our position with it. Notices go in. Delays get logged. Records get kept, not so the job runs better, but so that when it goes wrong we can prove whose fault it was. An entire profession of programmers, surveyors and claims consultants exists to win that fight after the event, and they are very good at it. Adjudication referrals in the UK have climbed to the highest level on record.

Here is the part that should stop us. Even when we are not planning to fight, the planning we do barely works. On the average site, only about 54 percent of the work planned for a given week actually gets done. That figure comes from the research behind the Last Planner System, and it has held up for years. The weekly plan, the thing the whole job is supposed to run on, is roughly a coin toss. We are not planning to finish. We are planning to be half right, and then to argue about the other half.

The plan was a fiction before you started

Defensive planning looks irrational until you see where the programme came from. On a lot of jobs, the date was never real in the first place.

This is not a complaint, it is government policy. The Treasury's own Green Book formally instructs appraisers to inflate their programmes, because estimates are, in its words, systematically too optimistic. For a

standard civil engineering job it says add up to 20 percent to the duration. Read that again. The government has written down, as official guidance, that the date you were first given is probably wrong, and wrong in the same direction every single time.

Psychologists call the honest version the planning fallacy, our well-documented habit of underestimating our own work. The less innocent version is what Bent Flyvbjerg calls strategic misrepresentation: the deadline quietly understated to win the work or get the scheme approved. Anyone who has watched a tender trimmed by a fortnight in the last meeting before submission knows the smaller version of the same move.

So picture the project manager on day one. They have been handed a programme they had no part in setting, built on a number the Treasury would tell them not to believe, sometimes shaved further to win the job. In that world, planning defensively is the logical move. We have built a system that sets the date up to fail, then trains everyone to keep good notes while it does.

The strange thing is that the rules of the game were not written to be played this way. The Society of Construction Law's own delay protocol says in its opening that its purpose is to avoid disputes, and describes the programme first as a tool for managing change. The NEC contract goes further: its early warning system comes with an explicit instruction that early warnings should not be used to allocate blame. The contract is almost begging us not to plan for the argument.

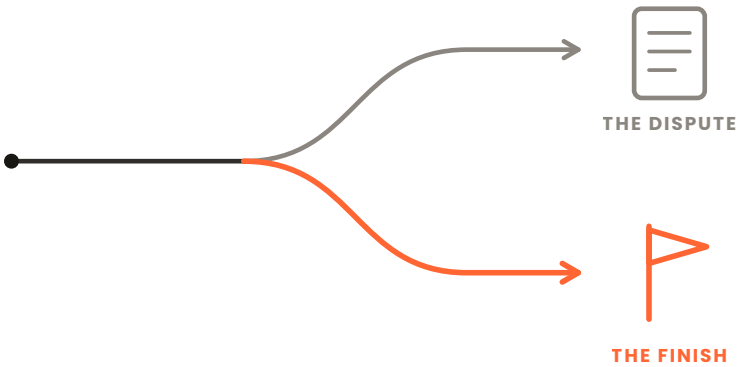

FIG. 5 — THE FORK. ONE PATH BUILDS THE FILE FOR THE DISPUTE. THE OTHER BUILDS THE JOB.

Two jobs, two endings

You can see both kinds of planning written large in projects everyone knows. When BAA built Heathrow Terminal 5, the client held the risk, all of it, all of the time. The suppliers carried no risk premium, which meant they had nothing to protect by claiming and no reason to fight. Rivals were put in integrated teams and made to plan together. Terminal 5 was delivered on time and on its planned budget. The chaos everyone remembers from opening day was an operational readiness failure after handover. The construction, planned without a reason to fight, finished.

Contrast that with a steelwork job at a paint plant in Northumberland that ended in the Technology and Construction Court. When it soured, the judge found the client had devised a strategy to force its contractor into insolvency, manipulating the valuation of the work down towards nothing. The contractor went under. Two projects, same industry. One was set up so nobody needed to fight, and it finished. The other was run as a fight, and it ended in court and in liquidation.

Watch what a planner does on the Friday afternoon they discover a three week slip. That is the whole diagnosis.

The defensive planner closes the office door and opens the contract, working out whose fault it is and how to word the notice. The delivery planner gets the supply chain in a room first thing Monday and starts rebuilding the sequence. Same delay. Two instincts. Two endings. One job quietly finds its way back to programme. The other lawyers up, and everyone on it spends the next year proving they were right instead of finishing the building.

Do it Monday

Pull out your current programme and ask one question of every recent update: was this change made to run the job better, or to strengthen a position? Count both kinds. The ratio tells you which kind of planning your business actually practises, whatever the values poster says.

06

PART TWO · THE CRAFT

A programme is an agreement

The other kind of planning starts from a different belief about what a programme is for. This chapter is that belief, and the method built on it.

A programme is not a document. It is an agreement between everyone who will build the job. The labourer, the supervisor, the site manager, the designer, the customer. If they have not genuinely signed up to it, you do not have a programme. You have a picture on a wall and a list of people to blame later.

Winning that agreement is the project manager's first real product, and everything else follows from it. A programme nobody believes in is just a picture, however beautifully it is resourced and logic-linked.

I came to call the way I work the Live Programme Method, my own name for what the wider industry calls collaborative or pull planning, because the programme lives in the room rather than in a drawer. It is four conditions, and everything else is technique.

FIG. 6 — THE FOUR CONDITIONS. ON THE SCREEN. IN THE ROOM. OWNED BY EVERYONE. BUFFERED.

On the screen. A programme updated monthly in a back office is a history document. It can tell you what went wrong. It cannot change what happens next. The live programme is on the screen in the weekly meeting, tracked and re-sequenced as the room talks, updated one to three times a week. I ran mine in front of my supply chain, two and three times a week, for years.

In the room. Most jobs hand the supply chain the one or two lines of the programme that cover its own scope, never the critical path running around it, and then hold it to a date it never had the full picture to question. Build the programme together, with the trades in the room while the sequence can still move, and people buy in because it is theirs.

Owned by everyone. The PM owns the whole. Senior managers share it. Site managers own their area on a six to eight week horizon. Trainees own one to two weeks, often as a simple list rather than a Gantt chart. Ownership is what does the updating; you never chase a person for progress on a plan they made themselves.

Buffered. Protected by a real buffer of 5 to 10 percent, won deliberately and defended in the open. The buffer gets the next chapter to itself, because it is the piece almost everyone gets wrong.

Measured by sign-off, not say-so

One discipline holds the whole method honest. Progress is measured by what is actually finished and signed off, not by what is claimed in a meeting. Digital quality sign-offs drive a line of balance, so the programme reports the truth whether or not the truth is comfortable. And the work that gets covered up gets independently checked before it disappears behind the next trade. The inquiries into the Edinburgh school failures found signed-off paperwork for walls nobody had actually inspected. Paper QA is not assurance.

When the people building the job make the promises, the plan starts coming true.

This is also how you move that 54 percent from the last chapter. When the people actually doing the work make the promises, and they only promise work that has genuinely been made ready, reliable sites run in the 80s, not the 50s. The maths of the whole method is in that one shift.

Whenever I make this argument, someone reasonable says the software now carries this skill. Be careful what you are asking it to do. A planning tool can sequence, level and re-baseline a programme in seconds. It cannot walk into a site cabin at half past seven and persuade a fed up groundworker that the new sequence is fair. The thing that wins time is not the calculation. It is the agreement, and agreement is made between people. Used well, technology makes a good delivery planner faster. It does not turn a defensive planner into a delivery one.

Do it Monday

Put the programme on the screen at your next supply chain meeting and update it live as the room talks. No minutes, no retyping, no version issued three days later. One meeting run this way tells you more about your job than a month of reports.

Then give every site manager a named area of the programme and a six week horizon, and every trainee a two week list. Review ownership weekly, not just progress.

07

PART TWO · THE CRAFT

Building the buffer

Projects that finish on time are not lucky. They carry a buffer of 5 to 10 percent, and that buffer is won, not hoped for.

A few years ago I ran a £22m, four storey concrete frame secondary school, built on a live school site, with seven sectional completions to hit along the way. Our own senior leadership would not sign the programme off at first because they thought it was too tight. We handed it over six weeks and one day early, and gave the ground floor back twelve weeks early.

We did not get lucky. We won that time before a spade was in the ground, and the way you do it is with a buffer. Not padding hidden in every task. A real, protected buffer, somewhere between 5 and 10 percent, won deliberately and defended.

The distinction matters, and Eliyahu Goldratt explained why decades ago. When you pad every individual task, the padding gets eaten. Work expands to fill the time it is given, and people start late because the slack looks like comfort. So you strip the padding out of the tasks, pool it into one buffer that protects the end date, and you guard that buffer like it is made of gold. Because it is: at your cost of a week, a 6 percent buffer on a £20m job is worth several hundred thousand pounds.

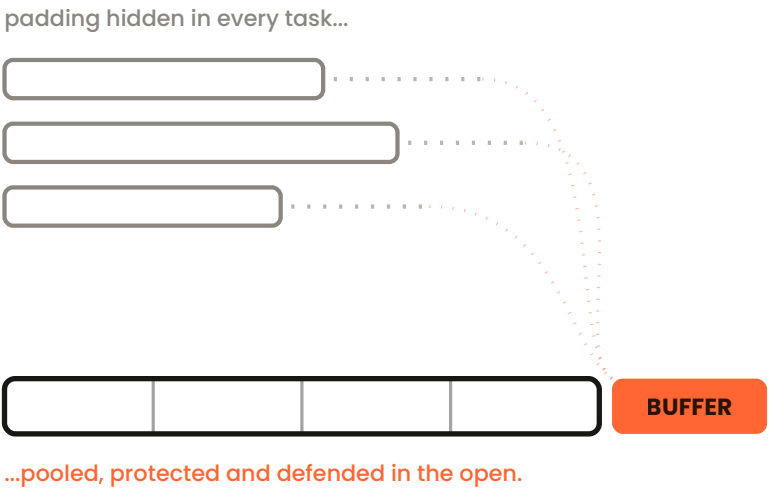

FIG. 7 — STRIP THE PADDING, POOL IT, PROTECT IT, AND DEFEND IT IN THE OPEN.

Here is the part almost nobody uses. The NEC contract already knows this. It makes you show your float and your time risk allowance openly, and it treats the terminal float, the gap between when you plan to finish and the contract date, as the contractor's to keep. The buffer is not a trick you hide from the client. It is a number you win in preconstruction, write into the programme, and defend in the open. Hiding it from your own team destroys the buy-in that built it.

Where the time is won

A month extra before contract is worth six on site.

An old hand taught that mantra to my generation and I have never seen it disproved. The problem that wrecks your programme, the difficult

outfall, the services clash, the long lead item, is cheapest to find on the drawing, not in the ground. That means getting the people who will actually build the job, the specialist trades and the supply chain, into the room while the design can still move. Bring the groundworker and the M&E engineer in at concept and they tell you what the architect could not. They will often give that advice free, before they are in competitive sales mode. Leave them out, as most contracts still do, and you inherit a programme built around a layout nobody who has to build it ever pressure tested.

Win the first 5 percent in preconstruction. Win the rest in the first third of the works, targeting the groundworks and frame on a new build, the opening trades on a refurbishment. After that the buffer is spent faster than it is earned, which is exactly why you bank it early.

Two cautions. The buffer is not a substitute for risk management: the buffer absorbs the unknown, the risk register manages the known, and any risk left unowned on that register will eventually bite harder than the buffer can cover. Run a live register with named owners and dates, reviewed with the same weekly discipline as the programme. And spend properly on knowing what you are building on or into. Industry analyses link unforeseen ground conditions to delay on roughly half of commercial schemes, against site investigation budgets of 0.1 to 0.3 percent of project value. Surveys are the cheapest risk money on any job.

Do it Monday

Open your current programme and find the padding: the task durations everyone knows are soft. Strip it, pool it, and show the team the single buffer you have built. Name who owns it and what it may be spent on.

Then price it. Your buffer in weeks, times your cost of a week, defended in those terms to your commercial director. A buffer with a price tag survives meetings that a buffer without one does not.

08

PART TWO · THE CRAFT

When the job slips

Every PM will inherit or create a late project. What separates the best is recovering it without turning the job into a battlefield.

Projects do not fail all at once. They drift. A week here. A revised sequence there. A partner who promises to catch up but never quite does. Each delay looks manageable, and each gets explained away in the programme update. By the time the critical path shows the impact, you are often months past the point where intervention would have been cheap.

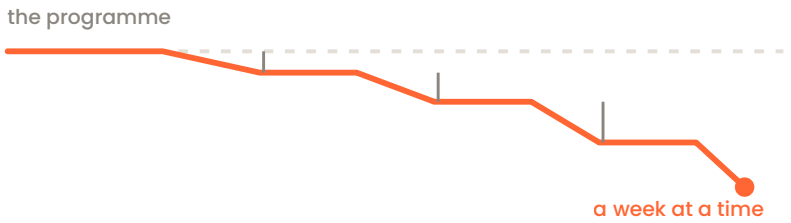

FIG. 8 — THE DRIFT. A WEEK AT A TIME, IN PLAIN SIGHT, WHILE THE REPORTS STAY GREEN.

You can hear a job start to slip before any dashboard shows it. The programme stops being mentioned in meetings. Dates get defended instead of discussed. Progress gets claimed instead of measured. None of those are programme events. They are culture events, and they are the job asking for help.

The instinct at that point is more reports and more pressure. Move a senior PM across, send in the commercial director, hold more meetings. It feels like action. But pressure without an honest programme teaches a

site to hide bad news, and hidden bad news is how a slip becomes a crisis. Often the people closest to the project have been normalising the drift for months, telling the board it is recoverable when the evidence says otherwise. Not because they are dishonest, but because they are too close to see it.

Four moves, in order

First, measure the truth. Honest progress measurement comes before any recovery promise. You cannot accelerate a fiction. Get a real baseline, programme, commercial and team, within the first week, however unpalatable it is. Speed matters: the businesses that recover projects are not the ones with the biggest budgets, they are the ones that act earliest, and the first thirty days decide most recoveries.

Second, rebuild it with the people who build it. A recovery programme imposed on the supply chain is fiction with a deadline. Get the trades around the table and rebuild the sequence together, because the plan only comes true if the people doing the work have made the promises.

Third, resequence for efficiency, not for the record. This is recovery as delivery, not recovery as claim preparation. Every hour spent building the file for the argument is an hour not spent finishing the building.

Fourth, lead the team that is behind. Morale, honesty with the customer, and the behaviours that get partners to lean in rather than lawyer up. A recovering job runs on exactly the culture this book keeps describing, at double strength.

A recovery plan without buy-in is fiction with a deadline.

I have used these four moves enough times to trust them. An £11m school I joined eight weeks into delay, with seven months left, handed over on the contractual date, with profit doubled. A ten week critical path delay from a structural frame failure on a £12m school, recovered to two days. Neither was won with a better claim. They were won by rebuilding the plan with the people doing the work, fast, and in the open.

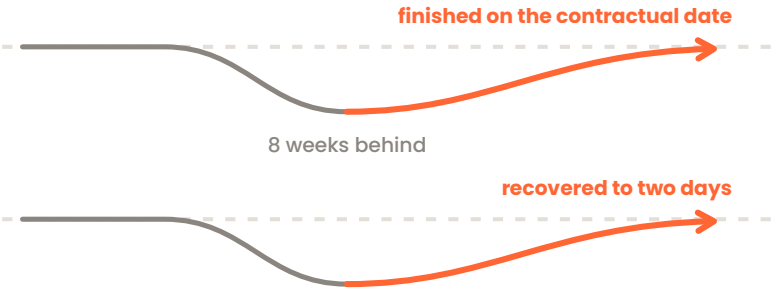

FIG. 9 — TWO REAL RECOVERIES. NEITHER WAS WON WITH A CLAIM.

Do it Monday

Build your early warning system out of the questions dashboards do not ask. What does partner progress look like against the original baseline, not the revised one? What is the gap between the cost forecast and the commercial position? How confident is the site team, really, about the next milestone?

And if a job already feels wrong, act this week. The gap between a project that costs you money and one that costs you your reputation is usually a few weeks of inaction.

03 The culture

Why good businesses cannot see their own problems, why the board is the last to know, and what changes when the truth travels.

09

PART THREE · THE CULTURE

The Friday afternoon question

Business improvement in construction does not fail at the strategy stage. It fails at the implementation stage, and it fails for one reason.

There is no shortage of ambition in this industry. Directors talk about digital transformation, continuous improvement, cultural change. They attend conferences, they buy software, they run workshops. And then they go back to their desks, and the business continues exactly as it was.

I have watched this happen more times than I can count, not because the people involved are incompetent, but because the approach is fundamentally wrong. The gap between boardroom strategy and site reality is where your margin disappears.

The software problem

Start with the most common mistake, because it is also the most expensive. A director sees a compelling demo. The vendor promises visibility, reduced risk, better decisions. The board approves it. Six months later, three people in the office use it, the site teams have gone back to WhatsApp and spreadsheets, and the vendor is selling the upgrade.

This is not a technology problem. It is a people problem dressed up as a technology problem. I have trialled hundreds of construction technology products. The ones that worked all had one thing in common: they made someone's job easier on day one. Not after a three month onboarding. Day one. The ones that failed had a different thing in common: they were selected by people who would never have to use

them. If you would not ask your best building manager to spend an extra hour a day on it, do not buy it.

The measurement illusion

Most construction businesses have KPIs. Programme, cost, quality, safety, reviewed monthly, reported to the board, and used mainly to manage the conversation with the customer. That is not measurement. That is paperwork. Real measurement tells you something you did not already know, early enough to act on it.

When I joined my previous company, the average time from a problem appearing on a project to the senior leadership team knowing about it was sixty days. By then a recoverable delay has become a contractual dispute, and a quality issue has been built over. Within eighteen months we had that cycle down to three days. Not through any dramatic intervention. Through measurement, escalation protocols, and a weekly discipline that required everyone from site to board to look at the same objective data.

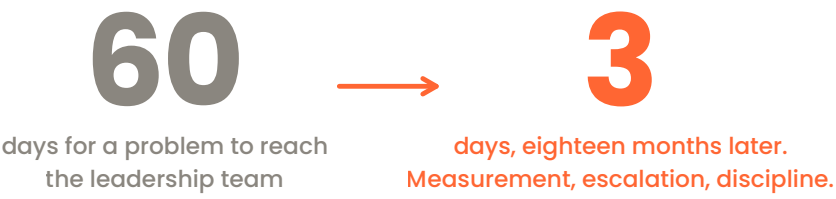

FIG. 10 — THE SAME BUSINESS, EIGHTEEN MONTHS APART. NOTHING CHANGED BUT WHAT WE LOOKED AT.

The results were not subtle. Extension of time claims started being approved as standard practice because the data was indisputable and the

customer knew straight away. Supply chain insolvency in M&E, which had been running at 20 percent across our projects, fell to zero and stayed there. Not because the market changed. Because we changed what we were looking at.

The blind spot underneath both

Here is the part most improvement programmes miss entirely. You can have perfect data, world class software and a rigorous escalation process. If the culture punishes the people who surface problems, none of it will work. Your data will be managed rather than read. Your escalations will be managed up, not solved.

> **Culture is what happens when a building manager finds a three week delay on a Friday afternoon.**

Does she call her operations director, knowing she will be helped? Or does she manage it quietly and hope it resolves before the next monthly report? The answer to that question tells you more about your business than any KPI dashboard ever will.

Building a culture where problems surface quickly requires two things that are harder than they sound: psychological safety, and consistent leadership behaviour under pressure. People will only tell you bad news quickly if they trust that telling you quickly is better than not telling you at all. That trust is built or destroyed by how the most senior people in the room respond when bad news arrives. The change is rarely dramatic. It is a series of small moments where someone tells the truth and the response is thank you, how can I help, rather than why didn't you tell me sooner.

If your people are protecting you from the information, that is a leadership problem. Not a people problem.

Do it Monday

Measure your own sixty days: take the last three significant problems and work out how long each existed before the leadership team knew. That number is your real reporting culture, whatever the dashboard says.

Then rehearse the Friday response with your senior team, out loud, until "thank you, how can I help" is the reflex and not the aspiration. One bad reaction undoes a year of posters.

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PART THREE · THE CULTURE

Why the board is the last to know

Every construction board believes it has visibility of its projects. Here is how the truth actually travels, and where it dies.

The monthly reports come in. The programme is updated. The commercial position is reviewed. RAG statuses are discussed, actions are noted, and everyone moves on feeling informed. What most boards do not see is the gap between what those reports say and what is happening on site. Not because the data is fabricated, but because it has been filtered, softened and shaped by people who have learned that delivering bad news has consequences.

Nobody sets out to mislead the board. A site manager flags a risk in a weekly report. The project director softens it before it goes up. The operations director summarises it as being managed. By the time it reaches the board, a genuine programme risk has become a green RAG with a footnote.

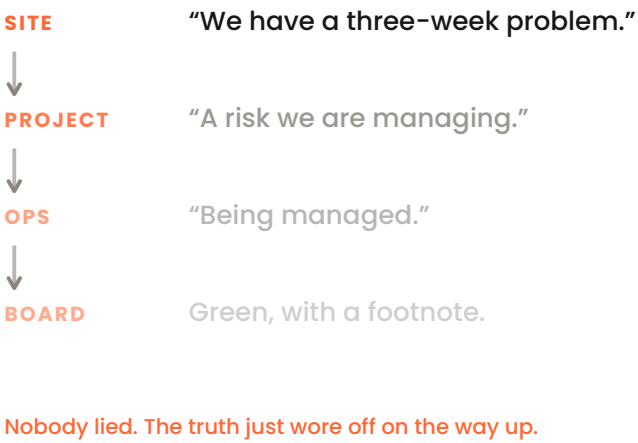

FIG. 11 — HOW HONEST REPORTING DIES. NOBODY LIED. THE TRUTH WORE OFF ON THE WAY UP.

This does not happen because people are dishonest. It happens because the culture punishes honesty. When a PM raises a problem and the response is blame, pressure, or a demand to just sort it out, the lesson is clear: keep it to yourself, fix it quietly, escalate only when you have run out of options. Over time the board gets told what it wants to hear rather than what it needs to hear.

The commercial blind spot

Nowhere is the gap more dangerous than in commercial reporting. Cost to complete forecasts that assume everything goes to plan. Variations logged but not yet agreed, counted as income. Risk allowances that shrink every month because nobody wants to be the one who says the project might lose money. By the time the board sees the real commercial position it is usually too late to influence it. The margin has already gone, and the only discussion left is how to explain it.

This is not a process failure. It is a culture failure. If your commercial teams believe a realistic position will be met with criticism rather than support, they will present an optimistic one. Every time.

What the board never hears

Ask any experienced site manager what they wish the board understood about their project. You will hear things that never make a monthly report. The partner who keeps underperforming but has never been formally challenged, because the QS does not want to trigger a dispute. The design issue parked for weeks because nobody wants to admit it was not caught earlier. The team member who is struggling and unsupported because everyone is firefighting.

These are not minor operational details. They are the leading indicators of project failure, and they live in conversations and site walks, not in dashboards. A board that relies solely on formal reporting is making decisions with one eye closed.

If the board reacts to bad news with blame, it will keep getting filtered reports.

Closing the gap starts with leadership behaviour, not better systems. Change how project reviews work. Instead of interrogating a PM about why something is amber, ask what support they need. Instead of demanding a recovery plan on the spot, create space for an honest assessment of what is realistic. And measure your leaders on whether problems get surfaced and addressed early, not on whether their projects look good on paper. Reward the amber flag raised at week four more than the green report that turns red at month six.

Do it Monday

At your next project review, open with one different question: what is the thing on this job you are least comfortable about? Then respond only with curiosity and support, whatever comes back. Do it three reviews in a row and watch what starts reaching you.

11

PART THREE · THE CULTURE

A supply chain that wants to work with you

Your supply chain does not just deliver your project. It is your project. And it decided how your jobs would go long before your management team did.

I spent a large part of my career on the buying side of construction. First as a project manager, then as head of supply chain, developing partners across the country on jobs I would never set foot on. That vantage point taught me something the industry does not say often enough: sixty to eighty percent of a project's value is delivered by people who do not work for you.

Most contractors know this. Far fewer act on it. The default approach is still transactional. Tender, appoint, manage, pay. And then everyone wonders why the same partners who are brilliant for someone else are merely adequate for them.

Every good partner I have ever known keeps a mental league table of their clients. The contractors who pay on time, plan properly, communicate like adults and stand by them when things go wrong get the best teams, the keenest prices and the fastest response. Everyone else gets what is left over.

EVERY GOOD PARTNER KEEPS THIS TABLE

1	**Pays on time, plans properly**	*the A team, the best price*
2	Decent, occasionally slow	*a good team, a fair price*
3	Fights every variation	*whoever is left, plus risk money*

You are on it whether you like it or not.

FIG. 12 — THE LEAGUE TABLE EVERY PARTNER KEEPS. YOU ARE ON IT WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT.

So if your projects keep getting the B team, the slow callbacks and the tenders that feel quietly padded, it is rarely because good partners do not exist. It is because the good ones are giving their best to someone else. That is not a procurement problem you can solve with a better tender list. It is a reputation problem, and your reputation is built in every interaction. How you run a pre-start. How quickly you certify a valuation. What your team actually does on the day something goes wrong.

The price of being a difficult client

Partners price risk, because they have to. If working with you means slow payment, a combative QS, a programme that changes every Friday and a fight over every variation, they price all of it in. You still get a number. It is just never their best number. The contractor down the road who pays fairly and communicates well is quietly getting five to ten percent better pricing for identical work. Not because they negotiate harder, but because their supply chain trusts them enough to sharpen the pencil.

Then there is the cost you never see in a tender. The partner who does not flag a problem early, because last time your team blamed them for it. The specialist who stops offering the better solution, because the last suggestion got thrown back in their face. None of that appears in a commercial report. All of it costs you.

What it looks like when you fix it on purpose

When I joined a previous company, the business was using 45 different M&E partners across 92 projects. Twenty percent of those partners went bust. M&E was half our total project cost. Nobody had put the numbers on a page. Once we did, the solution was obvious: reduce the partner pool dramatically, build performance frameworks on objective data tied to project outcomes, shift procurement from lowest cost to best value, and give partners direct visibility of their own performance data. Weekly, honest, specific.

Within twelve months the business was profitable. M&E insolvency has been zero since the strategy launched. None of it was complicated. The complexity was in the implementation: the conversations with procurement teams attached to old relationships, the commercial negotiations with partners not used to data, the cultural shift from adversarial to collaborative. That is where the experience matters. Not in the spreadsheet. In the room.

On a well-run job the conversation starts with how do we fix this, not whose fault is this.

That single difference decides whether your supply chain hides problems from you or brings them to you early, while they are still cheap to fix. Pay fairly, share problems early, ask for input while the job is still being

planned, and watch your partners' health as carefully as your programme: around four thousand UK construction firms fail every year, most of them specialists, and the warning signs show three to six months out. Slowing payments down the chain. Thinning labour. Applications ahead of progress. A partner failure mid-job typically costs months and adds around thirty percent to the cost of completing their work. Vigilance is part of the job, all the way through the job.

Do it Monday

Ask your three most important partners one question, in person: what is it like to work for us? Then be quiet and listen. If they hesitate, that is the answer.

And check your own league table position the hard way: compare your last three tender returns from a shared partner against what you know they priced elsewhere. The gap is your reputation, in pounds.

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PART THREE · THE CULTURE

Five problems hiding in plain sight

Culture problems do not announce themselves. They hide behind numbers that look explainable and excuses that sound reasonable. Here are the five I find most often.

You will not find culture problem on a single risk register in construction. Yet when a project bleeds margin, when your best people walk, when the same mistakes keep happening on different sites, culture is almost always the thing nobody is talking about. The uncomfortable part: the businesses that have these problems are rarely the ones that think they do.

1. Your best people keep leaving, and you keep blaming the market

Sometimes it is the market. But when you keep losing the people you cannot afford to lose, it is the environment you have built. People do not leave companies. They leave cultures that do not value them, develop them or listen to them. If your exit interviews keep producing the same vague answers about progression, the problem is not what they are saying. It is what they stopped saying to you long before they resigned.

2. Your site teams solve problems, but never flag them

This looks like competence. The programme says green, the reports look clean. Underneath, your teams are firefighting constantly and the real risks never reach the people who could act. If problems only surface

once they are crises, you do not have a reporting issue. You have a trust issue. A £50k conversation at week six becomes a £500k dispute at month nine.

3. The same mistakes keep happening on different projects

If the same failures repeat across different teams and sites, the issue is not individual performance. It is systemic. Construction is remarkably good at lessons-learned workshops and remarkably bad at changing anything as a result, because embedding change means shifting how people behave, not what they know. A new procedure will not fix a team conditioned to cut corners under pressure. Only changing the conditions will.

4. Your leadership team talks about culture but cannot describe it

Ask most MDs what their culture is and you get the values poster or a cliché about family. Neither is a culture. Culture is the set of unwritten rules that govern how people actually behave when nobody is watching: what happens when a deadline is missed, when a partner raises a concern, when someone new tries to do things differently. If what leadership describes does not match what site teams experience, that gap is where margin, morale and good people fall through.

5. You measure everything except how your people feel about working for you

Programme, commercial variance, safety stats, quality metrics: all tracked and RAG-rated. Ask what your people think about how the business is run and you get silence, or an annual survey treated as an HR

exercise. How your people feel about working for you directly predicts how they perform on your projects. If you are not measuring it, you are managing with one eye closed.

The difference between the businesses that grow and the ones that stagnate is whether they choose to look.

Do it Monday

Score your business against these five, honestly, with your leadership team in the room. Most businesses have two or three running in the background. Naming them out loud is the first, and hardest, move.

04 Monday

Everything in this book, turned into something you can start this week. Most of it free, none of it needing permission.

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PART FOUR · MONDAY

Ten honest minutes

We have put the whole method, the thinking in this book, and three working tools on our site. Free, no contact form. Here is how to use them.

Everything this book argues is published in full at constructing-culture.co.uk. The Live Programme Method, written up end to end. The long reads behind these chapters, with every statistic sourced. And three tools we built to turn reading into looking.

Most online assessments exist to capture your email address. The result arrives in your inbox with a sales call attached. These do not. They score your answers on the spot, and nobody sees the result but you. So there is no reason to flatter the answers.

FIG. 13 — THREE TOOLS, TEN MINUTES, NO CONTACT FORM.

The Delivery-Craft Capability Self-Assessment. Nine questions on the craft the qualifications skip: planning, buy-in, supply chain leadership, scored against the standard the Gold Medal job was run to. Run it on

yourself first, then on your best PM, then on your average one. The spread between those three scores is chapter two of this book, measured in your own business.

Is Your Programme Honest? Seven questions, two minutes. It tells you which kind of planning from chapter five is steering your job right now: built to finish, or built to be defended. Run it before your next programme review, not after.

Is Your Project Recoverable? Seven questions for the job that is already slipping. It shows whether the position is recoverable and where recovery has to start. If a job of yours came to mind twice while you read chapter eight, run this one today, before the next progress meeting.

A score is a map, not a grade.

Each result points at the two or three places to look first on Monday morning. The most useful way to run any of them is with your team, separately, then compare answers. The disagreement is the finding. When the site manager scores the programme honest and the PM does not, you have just found the exact conversation your job needs, and it costs nothing to have it.

If you want help

Some readers will take all of this and run with it themselves. Good. That is what it is published for.

For the ones who want help, two honest routes. The first is a free initial interview: no pitch, no slide deck, an hour looking honestly at how your business plans and delivers, and where the same mistakes keep repeating. If there is a fit, we talk about what to do about it. If there is not, you leave with a clearer picture of where to look.

The second is Going for Gold, the project management programme built on everything in part two of this book. It starts with a diagnosis of how your business actually plans, procures and delivers, then rebuilds ten modules around what it finds, taught over six months, one business per cohort, on your live projects, by the person who delivered the method. The results are measured on your jobs, at behaviour and delivery level. Most training teaches you to administer a project. This trains you to build one.

Both start in the same place: constructing-culture.co.uk.

Do it Monday

Ten minutes, one tool, honest answers. Then one conversation about the result with the person most likely to disagree with it.

That is the whole ask. Everything else in this book follows from being willing to look.

AFTERWORD

Leave the recorder on

Construction does not lack frameworks, reports or dashboards. We have spent thirty years writing the diagnosis. We are good at naming what is wrong. What we have never built is a way to pass on what works, and it walks out of the door every Friday in the heads of the people about to retire.

This book is my attempt to leave the recorder switched on. Twenty two years of delivery, the failures included, written down where anyone can use it. If one chapter changes one Friday afternoon on one of your jobs, it has done its work.

SHARE THE SOLUTION, NOT THE MISTAKE.

And a request, in the same spirit. When something in here works for you, share it. Not the mistake that made it necessary, just the solution, out in the open, where the next team can find it. Sharing a mistake invites blame. Sharing a solution invites adoption. It is the same learning, pointed the opposite way.

Aviation turned its worst days into everyone's lessons. We could start by turning our best days into everyone's too.

That is the open loop. Be brave enough to leave the recorder on.

Andy Pritchard MCIOB
Director, Constructing Culture Ltd
CIOB Gold Medal, Construction Manager of the Year
July 2026

Notes and sources

Every number in this book is checkable, and should be checked. These notes give the source for each one. Where a figure comes from my own projects or my own records rather than published research, the note says so plainly. Live links to every document listed here are collected at constructing-culture.co.uk/book.

CHAPTER 1. TWO QUESTIONS AT AN INDUCTION

0.2 percent of projects on time, on budget and on benefits. From the project database built by Bent Flyvbjerg of Oxford's Saïd Business School: of 3,022 major projects studied, 0.2 percent delivered on budget, on time and on the benefits promised. Bent Flyvbjerg, "Why megaprojects systemically fail, and what can be done about it?", Oxford Answers, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, 2019.

Productivity grown 0.4 percent a year since 2000, manufacturing at 3 percent. McKinsey & Company, "Delivering on construction productivity is no longer optional", August 2024, covering 2000 to 2022. The UK picture from the Office for National Statistics is no kinder: construction productivity grew around 0.5 percent a year over the two decades to 2019, and the ONS notes it has changed little in fifty years. ONS, "Productivity in the construction industry, UK: 2021".

Construction insolvencies the highest of any industry. The Insolvency Service, Company Insolvency Statistics, February 2026 commentary: construction recorded 3,912 insolvencies in the twelve months to January 2026, more than any other sector, a position it has now held for four consecutive years.

Around 700 suicides a year, almost four times the national average. The 700-a-year figure is the one used across the industry, including by the CIOB and the Considerate Constructors Scheme. The underlying research: the Office for National Statistics found the suicide risk among low-skilled construction workers to be 3.7 times the national average ("Suicide by occupation, England: 2011 to 2015", 2017), and Glasgow Caledonian University's analysis of ONS data found construction workers nearly four times more likely to take their own lives than workers in other sectors, with 507 deaths in 2021 in England and Wales alone. Hare, Lawani and McEwen, "Suicides among Construction Occupations in the UK", Journal of Engineering, Project, and Production Management, 2023.

CHAPTER 2. THE CRAFT NOBODY TEACHES

31 percent named poor original planning and unrealistic scheduling as the number one cause of delay. Cornerstone Projects, "Delays in the Construction Industry", 2022 survey of consultants, designers, principal contractors and trade contractors: 31.4 percent, down just two percentage points from the same survey in 2016, when it was also the top answer.

The Get It Right Initiative and CITB study of 25 live projects. A 26-month CITB-funded programme with Kier, Taylor Woodrow, BAM and VolkerStevin across 25 UK projects with a combined value of £942.5m. Participants estimated £92.6m of error was avoided; inadequate planning was identified as, in GIRI's words, by far the biggest cause, accounting for £71.2m of the savings. Reported in Construction Management, "Inadequate planning causes three-quarters of errors by value", April 2026.

The exam will not require calculations. Association for Project Management, Project Management Qualification (PMQ) Syllabus: "The examination questions will not require calculations to be performed." The same syllabus defines the command verbs used in assessment, including describe, explain and outline.

CHAPTER 3. WHAT A WEEK ACTUALLY COSTS

42 percent of projects ran over time. Glenigan, CITB, Constructing Excellence and BRE, "2019/20 UK Industry Performance Report", based on the UK Construction Industry Key Performance Indicators, the last full national measurement: the construction phase was on time or better on 58 percent of projects, meaning 42 percent ran over.

Avoidable error at 10 to 25 percent of project value. Get It Right Initiative, "Improving Value by Eliminating Error: A Call to Action", 2016. Direct costs of error run at around 5 percent of project value; once unrecorded process waste, latent defects and indirect costs are included, GIRI's estimate rises to between 10 and 25 percent of project cost, £10bn to £25bn a year across the sector.

Top 100 average pre-tax margin of 2.4 percent, 43 below 2 percent, 16 losing money. The Construction Index, Top 100 analysis, August 2025, based on accounts filed before 30 June 2025.

73 percent of adjudications include a claim for extension of time. Nazzini and Kalisz, "2022 Construction Adjudication in the United Kingdom", King's College London Centre of Construction Law and Dispute Resolution with the Adjudication Society,

2022: claims for extension of time were the most common head of claim by a wide margin, at 73 percent, ahead of final account claims at 51 percent.

The King's College London study on the causes of disputes. Nazzini and Godhe, "2024 Construction Adjudication in the United Kingdom", King's College London Centre of Construction Law and Dispute Resolution with the Adjudication Society, November 2024: the two leading causes were inadequate contract administration, named by 50 percent of respondents, and lack of competence of contract participants, at 42 percent.

The cost of a week of delay. The author's own model, built from prelims, financing and overhead recovery on live jobs. The implied rates run from 0.40 percent of contract value a week on a £5m job to 0.17 percent on a £100m job.

CHAPTER 4. THE RECORDER IS SWITCHED OFF

Only around half of reportable injuries are reported. The HSE's own estimate, from comparing employer RIDDOR reports with Labour Force Survey data: "the level of overall employer reporting of RIDDOR defined non-fatal injuries to employees is estimated at around a half." HSE, "Non-fatal injuries at work in Great Britain", annual statistics.

CROSS-UK. Collaborative Reporting for Safer Structures UK, operating since 2005 and expanded to fire safety in 2021. In Structural-Safety's own words to Parliament, "CROSS has been modelled on voluntary safety reporting in the aviation industry", with reports de-identified, reviewed by an expert panel and published with nobody named. Written evidence to the House of Commons Building Safety Bill inquiry, 2020.

CHAPTER 5. TWO KINDS OF PLANNING

Adjudication referrals at the highest level on record. 2,264 referrals in the year to April 2024, the highest since records began. Nazzini and Godhe, "2024 Construction Adjudication in the United Kingdom", King's College London with the Adjudication Society, 2024.

Only about 54 percent of planned weekly work gets done. Lean Construction Institute: "On average, only 54% of work planned for a given week is completed within the allotted schedule", from the research behind Glenn Ballard and Greg Howell's Last Planner System. See also Ballard, "The Last Planner System of Production Control", PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2000.

The Green Book instructs appraisers to inflate their programmes. HM Treasury, "Supplementary Green Book Guidance: Optimism Bias": "There is a demonstrated, systematic, tendency for project appraisers to be overly optimistic." Its table of adjustments gives an upper bound of 20 percent on works duration for standard civil engineering projects.

Strategic misrepresentation. Bent Flyvbjerg's term. See Flyvbjerg and Gardner, "How Big Things Get Done", 2023.

The SCL delay protocol. Society of Construction Law, "Delay and Disruption Protocol", 2nd edition, 2017. Its introduction states its purpose is to provide a means by which parties can resolve delay and disruption matters and avoid unnecessary disputes, and its first core principle presents the programme as a tool for managing change.

The NEC early warning instruction. NEC4 Engineering and Construction Contract, clause 15. NEC's own guidance is explicit: "Early warning notices should not be issued for the purpose of allocating responsibility or liability... the emphasis should be on agreeing the steps required to address the matter rather than on allocating blame." Klein, "NEC early warning notices: a unique risk management tool of mutual benefit", neccontract.com, 2017.

Heathrow Terminal 5. Under the T5 Agreement, BAA held all major project risk itself rather than transferring it to suppliers, and the terminal was delivered on time and within its planned £4.3bn budget. Global Infrastructure Hub, Heathrow Terminal 5 case study. The opening-day chaos was found by the House of Commons Transport Committee to stem from communication, staff training and system testing failures, not the construction. "The opening of Heathrow Terminal 5", HC 543, 2008.

The paint plant in Northumberland. Imperial Chemical Industries Ltd v Merit Merrell Technology Ltd [2017] EWHC 1763 (TCC) and [2018] EWHC 1577 (TCC). Mr Justice Fraser found the client had adopted a strategy under which valuations of the contractor's work were to be manipulated down, preferably to nothing, driving the contractor into liquidation.

CHAPTER 6. A PROGRAMME IS AN AGREEMENT

Reliable sites run in the 80s, not the 50s. The 54 percent baseline is the Last Planner research cited in chapter 5. The 80s figure is what the author has seen mature implementations achieve, consistent with the improvement reported in Last Planner case studies.

CHAPTER 7. BUILDING THE BUFFER

The NEC on float. NEC4 Engineering and Construction Contract: clause 31.2 requires the programme to show float and time risk allowances openly, and the effect of clause 63.5 is that terminal float, the gap between planned Completion and the Completion Date, stays with the contractor. See CECA, NEC4 Bulletin No. 10, "Float: Types and Ownership", 2021.

Ground conditions and site investigation budgets. The finding that around half of commercial schemes suffer delay from unforeseen ground conditions traces to National Economic Development Office research ("Faster Building for Commerce", 1988). Site investigation typically costs well under half a percent of development cost, with published figures commonly below 0.3 percent.

CHAPTER 9. THE FRIDAY AFTERNOON QUESTION

Sixty days to three days, and M&E insolvency from 20 percent to zero. The author's own record at a previous business, from its measured escalation data. Not external research, and offered as experience, not proof.

CHAPTER 11. A SUPPLY CHAIN THAT WANTS TO WORK WITH YOU

Sixty to eighty percent of project value delivered by the supply chain. A widely used industry figure. Pinsent Masons' analysis puts tier 2 and below at 70 to 80 percent of project expenditure ("Industrialised construction: aligning supply chain interests").

Five to ten percent better pricing for good payers. The author's own experience from years on the buying side. No published study quantifies this, which is itself telling: the industry does not measure what good behaviour earns.

Around four thousand firms fail every year, most of them specialists. The Insolvency Service: 3,912 construction insolvencies in the twelve months to January 2026, and above 4,000 in calendar 2024, with specialist trade contractors consistently the largest group (BCIS analysis of Insolvency Service data).

Warning signs three to six months out, and around thirty percent added to completion cost. The author's rule of thumb from live projects. Legal and insurance commentary on mid-job insolvency confirms substantial completion-cost premiums and delay without putting a standard number on them.

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This short book is about the other 99.8 percent. Why the industry keeps walking into the same hole. What a late week actually costs. The planning craft nobody teaches, the culture that buries its own lessons, and the discipline that handed a £22m school over six weeks and one day early.

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