Project Failure Pyramid(TM)

The 4-Level Diagnostic for Cascading Failures

Most project failure analyses stop at symptoms. The Project Failure Pyramid(TM) goes four levels deeper - from what you can see on the surface, to the governance and management failures that caused it, to the root cause decisions that set everything in motion. Every episode of Project Insider Asia applies this framework.

Purpose

The Project Failure Pyramid(TM) helps executives, sponsors and reviewers decide where to intervene when a project shows distress. By separating visible symptoms from management failure, governance failure and root-cause decisions, it prevents the common error of treating delays or cost overruns with operational fixes when the true problem sits in governance structure or foundational commitments made before delivery began.

Components

1. Symptoms

The visible indicators: delays, cost overruns, quality defects, team attrition

2. Management Failure

Operational breakdowns: poor risk management, scope creep, inadequate resources

3. Governance Failure

Structural breakdowns: unclear accountability, weak oversight, flawed procurement

4. Root Cause

Foundational decisions: overconfidence, pressure to commit, culture that suppresses bad news

How to use it

Begin at the top of the pyramid by cataloguing observable symptoms: schedule slippage, budget growth, defects, attrition. Do not stop there. Move down one level and ask which management disciplines - risk management, scope control, resourcing - failed to contain those symptoms. Then test the governance level: was accountability clear, was oversight independent, was procurement sound? Finally, examine the root-cause level: what early decisions, pressures or cultural norms made the later failures likely? Document evidence at each level before proposing remedies, and match corrective action to the lowest level at which failure is proven. Intervening only at the symptom level almost guarantees recurrence.

Worked example

PIA's investigation of the Boeing 737 MAX illustrates all four levels. Symptoms were visible: two fatal crashes in 2018 and 2019, followed by a global grounding. At the management level, the MCAS flight-control system relied on a single angle-of-attack sensor, and safety-critical information was not fully communicated to pilots or regulators. At the governance level, congressional hearings and subsequent reporting documented weakened FAA oversight, with substantial certification work delegated to Boeing itself. At the root-cause level, investigators and journalists identified intense competitive pressure from Airbus's A320neo, which drove a commitment to minimal pilot retraining and an accelerated derivative design rather than a clean-sheet aircraft. The pyramid shows why fixing MCAS software alone could never address what actually failed.

Limitations

The pyramid is a diagnostic lens, not a causal proof. Real failures interact across levels, and evidence about governance and root-cause decisions often emerges only through inquiries, litigation or whistleblowers, long after delivery. Analysts applying it retrospectively must guard against hindsight bias: decisions that look reckless after failure may have been defensible given what was knowable at the time. It structures enquiry; it does not replace it.

Relationship to PMOS

The pyramid is intended to become PMOS's core diagnostic module. PMOS, currently in development, will embed the four-level cascade into stage-gate reviews and escalation logic, so that reported symptoms trigger structured enquiry into management, governance and root causes rather than superficial corrective action.

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