

Beyond the Checkbox: Reimagining Project Delivery for a Sustainable Future

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A Conversation with Dr. Joel Carboni, Founder and President of Green Project Management (GPM®)

Dr. Joel Carboni is a name synonymous with sustainable project management. A pioneer in the field, his methodologies, developed through GPM®, have influenced organizations across 55 countries, fundamentally shifting how sustainability is integrated into project frameworks.

Dialing into a Teams call, he is currently based in the US Midwest, one senses a blend of academic rigour and a pragmatic, almost rebellious, drive to challenge the status quo, that has taken root in the project industry. With a Ph.D. in Sustainable Development and Environment, and a career spanning three decades, Carboni's insights offer senior project professionals a roadmap for impactful, sustainable project delivery.

From Church Renovations to Global Influence: An Accidental Path

"It was entirely accidental, my first steps as a project manager " Carboni reflects, a smile beaming through the screen. "I was a high-schooler, tasked with a project of renovating a local church building en route to my eagle scout rank, and I loved it." This early foray into project management, he admits, set him on a conventional path, a college degree, leading to consultancy work in the 'Big four' and then commissions in both government and the private sector. But a pivotal moment, involving an unexpected encounter with a herd of goats, would dramatically alter his trajectory.

"Goats," he states firmly, "changed everything." A seemingly mundane land assessment project that I was involved in revealed a stark reality: the sheer volume of paper-based regulations, coupled with slow take up of digital technologies, highlighted the inherent waste and lack of holistic impact assessment in

conventional project delivery. “It was a lightbulb moment,” he explains. “I realized we were unconsciously adding to the problem. My mission became clear: to understand how projects could operate sustainably and drive industry change.”

Empowering Practitioners: The Key to Real and Permanent Change

Sixteen years on, GPM® stands as a testament to Carboni’s vision. But how has he translated this vision into tangible results? “We start by assessing an organization’s current state and then collaborate on innovative solutions,” he explains. Crucially, he emphasizes that sustainability is not a top-down mandate, but a practice that can and should be cultivated at the project level.

“I see this differently to most in the industry,” he asserts. “Real change happens at the ground level. We need to empower project managers with the tools and knowledge to measure and report on progress.” This bottom-up approach, he argues, is the most effective way to quickly embed sustainable practice into project delivery.

Challenging the Status Quo: From Silos to Collaboration

While acknowledging progress, Carboni identifies persistent challenges. “We still operate in silos,” he states, “hindering the collaborative effort needed to address complex sustainability issues.” He advocates for industry-wide collaboration through think tanks, urging competitors to unite in finding solutions. “We need to be more comfortable with cross-industry working,” he adds, “to tackle challenges that span multiple sectors.”

He also calls for a shift in corporate mindset. “Organizations must be more attuned to the impact of *not* delivering sustainably,” he stresses, “and remove the barriers to action when data indicates the need for change.”

Project Managers: The Agents of Change

Carboni places immense faith in project managers as agents of change. “Stop asking permission to manage projects sustainably,” he advises. “It should be inherent in your role.” He urges practitioners to be bolder in applying sustainable methodologies, moving beyond mere compliance and tick-box exercises in ESG.

“Project managers are the ones on the ground, witnessing the issues and understanding societal needs,” he explains. “They are ultimately responsible for delivering and embedding a circular economy. They are the delivery agents.”

A New Standard: Measuring Pollution at the Project Level

Looking ahead, Carboni is working with the Global Reporting Initiative, developing a groundbreaking corporate-level pollution standard. “For the first time,” he reveals, “organizations will need to report on how they measure and mitigate pollution at the project level, so providing teams with real clarity on their impact, will be crucial. This also removes the opportunity for corporates to ‘fiddle the books’ when it comes

to reporting .”

His advice to project managers seeking to make a difference is clear: “Assess sustainability needs from the outset, prioritize them in planning and execution, and leverage the wealth of resources available, to enable your efforts.” He also calls for greater advocacy, ensuring that sustainability receives the same prominence as other critical project factors.

In a world increasingly grappling with the urgency of climate action, Dr. Joel Carboni’s work offers a compelling vision: a future where sustainable project delivery is not an aspiration, but a fundamental practice. It is a call to action for senior project professionals to move beyond the ESG checkbox, embrace innovation, and become the architects of a more sustainable future.

Founded in 2009, GPM® is the world’s leading organization driving sustainability within the project management profession and advocating for the project profession within the sustainability domain. Advocating projects as the engines of change, and when managed they can solve the world’s most urgent challenges—from climate change to social inequality.

To find out more about the groundbreaking work that GPM® is conducting you can access the website [here](#). Where project practitioners will find a wealth of free resources and case studies on the work being undertaken by Caroni and his team.