

APM Warns ‘Strategic Misrepresentation’ Is Undermining Project Success

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New guidance from the Association for Project Management (APM) is urging project leaders to confront one of the most damaging behavioural risks in modern project delivery: strategic misrepresentation.

The issue, highlighted in a new paper from APM’s Governance Interest Network, centres on the deliberate presentation of projects in a more favourable light than evidence supports. Whether to secure funding, gain approval, influence stakeholders or justify a preferred outcome, strategic misrepresentation can distort decision-making from the earliest stages of a project lifecycle.

According to the paper, *The Big Bad Wolves in Your Projects or Programmes: Strategic Misrepresentation and What to Do About It*, the consequences can be severe; from budget overruns and delays to governance failures and complete project collapse.

The report builds on the work of Professor Bent Flyvbjerg, one of the world’s leading researchers on megaproject delivery, who has long identified strategic misrepresentation as a central driver of failure in major programmes. Unlike optimism bias, which can stem from genuine overconfidence, strategic misrepresentation involves conscious deception or deliberate framing designed to influence outcomes.

Examples identified by APM include selectively interpreting data, imposing flawed delivery constraints, and using language strategically to anchor stakeholders to a preferred narrative.

The paper argues that project failure is rarely caused by a single falsehood. More often, it emerges through a chain of connected distortions that gradually sustain an unrealistic version of reality over time.

That makes the issue particularly difficult to detect.

In many organisations, misrepresentation does not always appear as outright dishonesty. It can emerge subtly through organisational pressure, unconscious bias, political incentives, or the simplification of complex information for executive audiences. The way information is framed, the paper warns, can shape how risks, progress and viability are understood long before delivery problems become visible.

This emphasis on language is one of the report's central themes.

APM argues that wording, framing and narrative construction can heavily influence decision-making within projects. The terminology used in board papers, business cases and progress updates may unintentionally suppress challenge or steer stakeholders towards predetermined conclusions.

In practice, this means projects can become trapped inside narratives that no longer reflect operational reality.

The warning arrives at a time when organisations are increasingly under pressure to deliver transformation programmes quickly while operating within tighter budgets, heightened scrutiny and growing complexity. In those conditions, the temptation to oversimplify, overpromise or minimise uncertainty can intensify.

The report also raises concerns around artificial intelligence and automation.

While AI-driven reporting and analytics could help identify inconsistencies and improve transparency, APM warns the same technologies may also amplify strategic misrepresentation if flawed assumptions, biased data or misleading narratives are automated at scale.

Carol Deveney of the APM Governance Interest Network said the challenge affects projects of every size and sector.

"Projects of all kinds and all sizes are at risk of strategic misrepresentation," she said.

"The advent of AI, along with increasing system and reporting automation, presents an opportunity to address this risk or to amplify it. We created this paper to explain the context of strategic misrepresentation along with the psychological and social factors that are behind it.

"It provides examples of the real impact of this on a number of large projects and offers practical techniques and tools that are suitable for all."

Rather than treating the issue purely as a governance failure, the paper positions strategic misrepresentation as a cultural and behavioural challenge that requires stronger organisational awareness.

Among its recommendations is the need for project leaders to actively recognise how language influences judgement and decision-making. The report encourages professionals to develop a sharper understanding of the psychological drivers behind bias, deception and narrative framing.

Observation is another key theme. APM recommends creating structured trigger points for challenge and critical feedback at key stages of a project lifecycle, including initial proposals, pre-business case reviews and stage-gate approvals. These intervention points are designed to identify distortions before they become embedded into programme delivery.

Reflection also plays a central role.

The report argues that organisations often move through governance processes too quickly, leaving insufficient space for genuine scrutiny or debate. It recommends building more time into gateway reviews, audits, change control and decision-making processes so that assumptions, concerns and stakeholder perspectives can be properly documented and tested.

Underlying many of the recommendations is the concept of psychological safety; creating environments where individuals feel able to challenge assumptions without fear of reputational or political consequences.

For project professionals, the findings reinforce a broader shift taking place across the industry. Technical delivery capability alone is no longer enough. Increasingly, successful project leadership depends on behavioural awareness, governance maturity and the ability to navigate organisational dynamics with transparency and integrity.

The paper also highlights a difficult reality for many project environments: strategic misrepresentation is often rewarded in the short term. Overly optimistic business cases can secure funding faster, ambitious timelines may satisfy political stakeholders, and simplified reporting can reduce friction in governance forums.

The long-term consequences, however, are typically paid during delivery.

Projects launched on distorted assumptions frequently encounter escalating costs, delayed schedules, weakened stakeholder confidence and reactive decision-making. By the time those issues surface publicly, recovery options are often limited.

For organisations managing large transformation programmes, infrastructure investment or public sector initiatives, the implications are significant. The report suggests that improving project outcomes may depend as much on creating cultures of constructive challenge as on improving methodology or technology.

At a time when confidence, transparency and accountability are becoming increasingly important in project delivery, APM's intervention places behavioural governance firmly on the agenda.

'The Big Bad Wolves in Your Projects or Programmes: Strategic Misrepresentation and What to Do About It' is available exclusively to APM members.