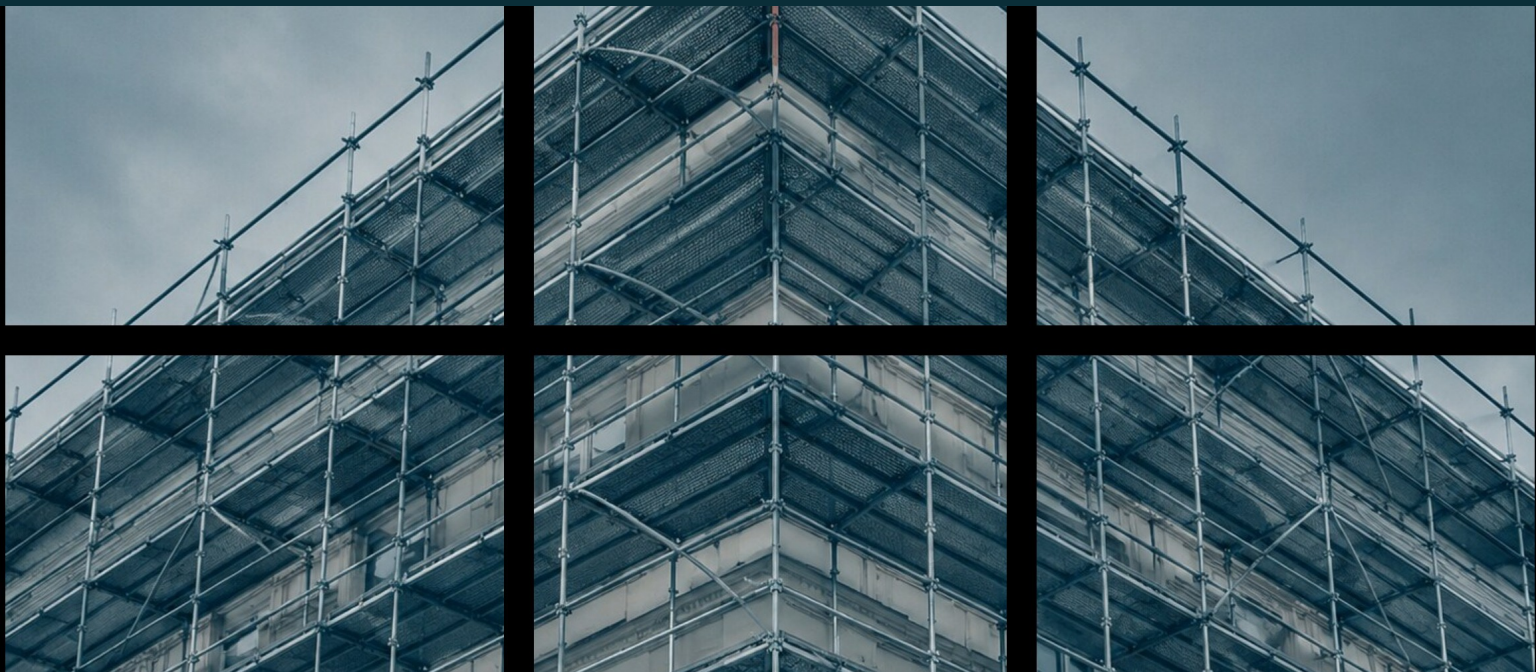


BEYOND THE BADGE

# Badges, Not Outcomes: How Certification Culture Learned to Measure the Wrong Thing

On the credential as a proxy for competence — and the cost of mistaking a floor for a ceiling in programme and change work.



Giovanni Leonardi

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# Badges, Not Outcomes: How Certification Culture Learned to Measure the Wrong Thing

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*“We are measuring people by their badges, not by their outcomes,  
and we have half-convinced ourselves the two are the same.”*

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## 1. The badge on the door

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Walk the floor of almost any large change programme this year and you can read a person's standing before they open their mouth. It is printed on the lanyard, appended to the email signature, pinned to the first line of the CV: Foundation, Practitioner, Master Black Belt — the capital letters that announce this one has passed. We have built a profession in which the credential arrives ahead of the person, and increasingly stands in for them.

I have sat on enough selection panels to know how quickly the sorting happens. A stack of forty CVs becomes a stack of twelve, not because anyone read forty accounts of what these people actually delivered, but because the advertisement said "PRINCE2 Practitioner essential" and twenty-eight of them were not. The filter is fast, defensible, and almost entirely blind to the only question that matters: can this person run the thing when it starts to go wrong?

This is the quiet settlement of our moment — the peak, I suspect, of a decade-long drift into process orthodoxy. We are measuring people by their badges, not by their outcomes, and we have half-convinced ourselves the two are the same.

## 2. How we started counting the wrong thing

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It did not happen by conspiracy. It happened because badges are legible and outcomes are not.

Consider what a resourcing lead or a bid team is actually asked to do. They must compare people they have never seen work, on timescales that allow no real inspection, and then defend the choice to someone more senior. Against that pressure a certificate is a gift. It is standardised, it is externally awarded, and — crucially — it moves the risk elsewhere. If the certified programme manager fails, no one is blamed for the hire; the box was ticked. Judgement, by contrast, is unprotected. To back a talented but uncertified candidate is to stake your own name on a reading of their ability, and few of us are paid enough to do that gladly.

So the credential spread, and every actor in the market had reason to help it spread.

- Buyers wrote it into procurement: public-sector frameworks and private tenders alike began to mandate accredited staff, so that the certificate became a condition of even being read.

- Suppliers answered rationally: if a certified consultant could be billed at a premium and an uncertified one could not be placed at all, every firm sent its people on the courses.
- Individuals drew the obvious conclusion: the certificate was career insurance — portable, inflation-proof, and the fastest way to lift a day rate without changing anything you did on the Monday.

Each response is sensible on its own. Together they produce a market that rewards the acquisition of badges far more reliably than the delivery of results, because the badge is visible on the day of hire and the result is not visible for eighteen months — by which time everyone has moved on to the next thing.

*A certificate tells you someone sat in a room and could reproduce a method under exam conditions. It does not tell you whether they can read a room, hold their nerve, or say the thing a sponsor does not want to hear.*

### 3. The case for the credential — and where it gives way

It would be cheap to pretend the certificate is worthless, and dishonest too. The strongest version of the argument for it deserves to be met head on.

The case runs like this. Change work has no barrier to entry; anyone can print "programme manager" on a business card. A common method gives a dispersed, contractor-heavy workforce a shared vocabulary, so that a stage gate or a risk log means the same thing on a project just inherited from another supplier as it did on the last. Certification raises a floor: it screens out the outright charlatan, it gives buyers who cannot themselves assess competence a defensible proxy, and it lets large organisations move people between programmes without re-teaching first principles each time. All of that is real, and I would not wish to return to the days before any of it existed.

But notice what the argument actually establishes. It establishes that a certificate is a useful floor — a way of excluding the clearly unqualified and creating a common tongue. It says nothing about the ceiling. And a floor mistaken for a ceiling is precisely our problem: we treat the credential not as the minimum below which we will not go, but as the scale on which we rank everyone above it. The method exam that usefully excludes the cowboy tells you almost nothing about the distance between a competent programme manager and an exceptional one — and that distance is where every troubled programme is won or lost.

The common language is worth having. It is simply not the same thing as having something worth saying.

### 4. What the certificate cannot certify

Here is the part the exam cannot reach.

I watched two programmes of almost identical shape run in the same organisation inside a year of each other. Both were mid-sized systems replacements with a hard regulatory deadline; both were staffed by a fully certified management cadre — the same accreditations, the same method wall-charts, the same colour-coded plans. One delivered

late but intact. The other consumed roughly half as much again in cost before it was quietly restructured – and the difference had nothing to do with method.

The programme that held together was run by someone who, in month three, looked at a green status report and refused to believe it. She could not have told you which process her scepticism came from, because it came from no process. It came from having been lied to by a green report before. She reopened a workstream everyone had signed off, found that the integration testing had been deferred rather than done, and forced the bad news up to the steering committee while there was still time to act on it. None of that is examinable. There is no multiple-choice question for the instinct that a plan has gone too quiet, nor for the willingness to be the unwelcome voice in a governance meeting.

The second programme was run entirely by the book – and the book was followed immaculately, right up to the point of failure. Every artefact existed. Every gate was passed. The method was not violated; it was simply mistaken for the work. That is the failure our certification culture cannot see, because from the outside the two programmes were indistinguishable: same badges, same documents, opposite outcomes.

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*“The method was not violated; it was simply mistaken for the work.”*

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What separated them is a cluster of things our credentials do not touch – judgement under ambiguity, the courage to escalate, the political read of where a decision really sits, and the plain honesty to name a thing that is going wrong. These are learned, but they are learned by doing and being held accountable, not by attending. And because we do not measure them, we do not develop them deliberately; we simply hope they turn up.

## 5. Measuring the thing itself

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If the charge is that we measure the wrong thing, the obligation is to say what measuring the right thing would look like. It is harder – which is precisely why we avoided it – but it is not impossible.

1. Treat certification as a threshold, not a score. Use it to clear the floor, then stop using it. Once a shortlist has passed the bar, ban the credential from the conversation and make the panel argue about evidence of delivery instead. The moment two candidates are compared on how many badges they hold, the wrong contest has begun.
2. Ask for outcomes, not attendance. A CV should have to say not "Practitioner, 2005" but "inherited a stalled programme, found the real blocker, and here is what happened next." Then interview for the war story and probe it until you know whether they lived it or merely narrated it.
3. Make senior people stake their judgement – and cover them when they do. If backing an uncertified but able candidate is a personal career risk, no one will take it. The organisations that grow talent are the ones where a leader can say "I will vouch for this person" without being hanged the one time the bet does not pay.
4. Develop the unexaminable on purpose. Put people who are learning next to hard, real problems, under the eye of someone who has done it, and hold them to the result. Apprenticeship, not attendance, is how judgement has always transferred; we have

simply let the certificate crowd it out.

None of this asks us to burn the certificates. The floor they provide is worth keeping. It asks only that we refuse to let the floor masquerade as the ceiling — that we stop accepting the badge as a settled verdict on a person's worth when it is only the opening of the question.

At the height of our process confidence we have become unusually good at measuring conformance and unusually poor at measuring contribution. The professional bodies will not correct this for us; it is not in their interest to tell you that their certificate predicts less than you hoped. The buyers will not correct it while the tick-box shelters them. It falls, as these things do, to the people actually accountable for delivery to insist on the harder measure — to look past the badge on the door and ask again the only question that was ever worth asking. Not what have you passed. What have you delivered.