

ARTICLE · AI NATIVENESS

The Watermelon Paradox

How the way we measure people shapes the way they behave, and why this matters more than ever with AI.

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01

The golden rule

In the early 90s, in my starting days as a project manager, we had a golden rule with zero tolerance for debate: you deliver a project in time, in budget and in scope. Do that well, and you are considered a mature senior project manager.

And we got really, really good at it.

Our projects were always green. On time. In budget. In scope. At least, that is what our dashboards and status reports said. In reality, many of them were red. The value was missing, the operational teams were struggling, and the costs kept rising long after go-live.

That is the watermelon paradox. Green on the outside, where the dashboard is. Red on the inside, where the real story is.



The report shows the outside. Reality is on the inside.

We did not get good at this because we got good at project management. We got good at it because we got good at ignoring everything else.

● ON THE DASHBOARD

On time. In budget. In scope.

● IN REALITY

Lost value, struggling operations,
rising costs.

02

What we ignored

We ignored value. Real value is not fixed in the first set of requirements. It is progressive insight: organisations discover real value as they learn and optimise along the way. By being fixed and rigid with the initial requirements, we killed the real value opportunity.

We ignored operations. Once we declared a project "complete", the next step was handover to the production teams. This was a real dump-and-ghost scenario. We threw it over the wall and walked away. The chaos, ineffectiveness and inefficiency that followed started eating away the actual benefits of the project.

And that broke our ROI story too. When we measured Return on Investment, we compared the investment with the intended benefits. The moment the benefits were larger than the investment, we were happy. What really happened in the dump-and-ghost scenario was a dramatic increase in operational cost. ROI means nothing if you do not include Total Cost of Ownership and Total Value of Ownership in the equation.

03

The silver bullet

In the early 2000s, I continued my career by bringing management concepts to organisations internationally, through consulting, coaching and training in the beautiful best practices of programme, project and process management. I was convinced I was helping organisations with the silver bullet.

But silver bullets only work in werewolf stories.

04

How I was measured

Years later, reading Leaders Eat Last by Simon Sinek, it hit me. Thinking back on my project management days, one question kept coming up: why in the world did I behave that way? In my heart, I knew this was wrong!

The answer was simple: that is how I was measured.

This realisation is crucial to understand: the way we measure people influences the way they behave.

Once I saw this, I started to see the flaws in the way so many organisations set up their governance and metrics.

The problem is not that people do not know how to do their job well. The problem is that stupid metrics create stupid behaviour. People do exactly what the system rewards.

This turned out to be a concept I could not shake off. Only when you have seen light, do you understand darkness.

05

Lead and lag

Profit, shareholder value, time to market, NPS and customer satisfaction all matter. But they are results (lag indicators). They are a consequence of how people behave inside the organisation (lead indicators).

Telling people to be better, faster, cheaper and more innovative has very little effect. Changing what you measure changes a lot. It is important to keep the board and shareholders happy, but you do not achieve that by forcing their metrics into every corner of the organisation.

I hope you realise by now that the road to success shouldn't be measured in terms of success, but in the way you walk that road.

In my opinion, this realisation and insight matter more today than ever before.

06

Watermelon AI

Because now we are about to repeat the mistake with AI.

If organisations measure AI adoption the old way (costs cut, headcount saved, tools deployed), they will get watermelon AI. Green on the AI dashboard. Red in reality.

Those old metrics only show one side: what AI produces. They miss the other side: what happens to your people. Is AI amplifying their judgment and capability, or quietly replacing it? Is the organisation learning faster, or just running faster? Do people still have a real say, and the safety to challenge the AI systems shaping their work?

An organisation can look highly efficient on paper while its human capability slowly fades away. That is a watermelon too.

If you listen to the dystopian prophets, AI will replace, eat and destroy humanity. And this scenario is realistic if we let it happen. Be careful what you wish for.

But good and bad things will happen either way, and we still have a say in the direction. If we truly want a sustainable future together with AI, we need to look at it from a perspective of synergy and symbiosis. And once again, it starts with what we choose to measure.

That is why we built KAIVANT®: to measure how AI-native an organisation really is, by looking at both sides. What AI is delivering, and what the organisation is building in its people. One side can never make up for the other.

07

Which wolf will we feed?

It is our choice to decide whether we feed the bad wolf or the good wolf.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Is your AI green on the outside, *red on the inside?*

Find out where you stand. The free Kaivant-I self-test gives you a first read on how you work with AI, and whether it is building your capability or replacing it.

Take the free self-test · kaivantscore.com/KI-test

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michiel R. de Boer is the founder and Chief Architect of KAIVANT®, and co-owner and managing director of MindMagine. For more than 30 years, he has helped organisations across Asia Pacific with the best practices of programme, project and process management, governance and leadership. Based in Kuala Lumpur, he now focuses on helping organisations become truly AI-native, without losing the human capability that makes them work.