Erythrophobia: The Fear of Red

BY FARA LEVINE AND KRISTINE JORDAN

Do you really know what is going on within your organization and the truth about the status of your projects? It is easy enough to trust what is presented on paper, but maybe it is time to take a deeper look and explore how a status report may be a sign of a broader problem within your organization.

When we were children, we associated the color red with the little wagon we sat in while our parents pulled us, or the color of the Valentine's Day card we gave to our elementary school crush. Somewhere between the innocent days of red heart-shaped cards and adulthood, we became conditioned to see red and think "danger" or "do not touch." For many, red has come to symbolize aggression, confrontation, and harm. Look around and you'll see many examples of

the negative connotations: "in the red," financially speaking; emergency vehicle lights; or hurricane flags — all indications that something is wrong, needs to be corrected, or should be avoided.

It shouldn't be a surprise, then, that the fear and anxiety associated with red in the rest of the world has spilled into our professional lives, specifically when dealing with status reporting.

It is not the existence of problems and issues that will cause a project to fail; it is how the problems and issues are addressed.

When employees see red in a status report — leveraging the common red, yellow and green traffic light scheme — it can evoke the sound of screaming sirens or the feeling of blood pumping faster in their veins. A status owner can perceive a small red circle on a status report as failure or as declaring surrender and create a sense of hysteria with status recipients. The added pressure and questions of competence can stress out employees, concealing the reality: A red status report, when used practically and objectively, is very valuable.

Does your organization have a tendency to avoid the use of a red status indicator at all costs? Think about why your resources may be avoiding the red circle. Consider two key roles: the status owner, who delivers the status update and is often a project manager or delivery lead; and the status recipient, often a project sponsor or key stakeholder. Their aversion to red status reports can frequently be a symptom of one or more underlying problems: corporate politics, a fear-based workplace environment or a culture suffering from "hero syndrome."

Corporate Politics

A project status report is frequently seen and used as a political tool. The art of gathering the required information and transforming it into a story one wants to tell is akin to a political campaign. Sometimes, facts may be apparent in the status report. Other times, they may be hidden under an optimistic report that masks reality by providing a false sense of security and appeasing the report recipients. As someone with responsibilities to both the team and the project leadership, a status owner has to ride the fine line between brutally accurate reporting and maintaining the trust of her team members. A status change that raises alarms may make it appear that the team is performing poorly. In turn, a red status could also affect the stature of a project leader within the organization.

In either case, the result is frequently a downward spiral for the project, and all involved, as the truth is sacrificed. When politics are in play, someone or something always suffers.

The reality in a highly political corporate environment:

Status Owner: Playing the game and hiding the facts
**Recipient:** False sense of confidence

Fear

In a fear-based environment, a status owner may resist divulging negative information about a project to avoid drawing unwanted attention to the team or individual team members. A fear-infused culture fosters secretive and destructive actions that hinder the overall success of the organization. High expectations from leadership, combined with pressure to succeed, could result in misaligned expectations, hidden problems, and ignored risks. Failing to call attention to concerns within a project could result in a false sense of security and delay action that could resolve the underlying concerns. In these cases, the status owner is only attempting to prevent panic and protect her career. Inevitably, however, issues that are not exposed early become critical and could result in project delays or financial overruns.

The key to overcoming these issues? Transform your environment to one that is open and trusting, allows risk-taking, and encourages managers and employees to admit mistakes, accept challenges, and address issues head on.

The reality in a fear-based environment:

Status Owner: Disguising the truth to avoid risk and other repercussions
Recipient: Controlling the situation; creating a false sense of success
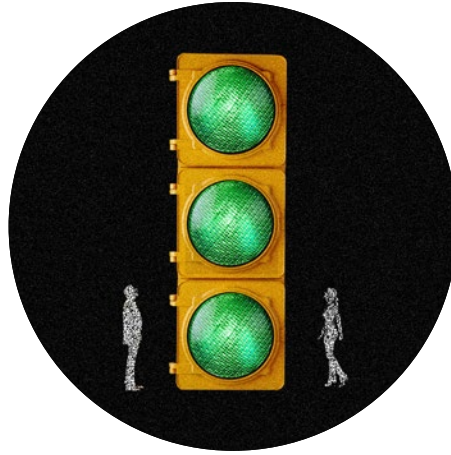
Heroism

We have all encountered the "hero" in an organization. This person will not accept defeat, and a red status report means just that: She lost the battle. Instead, the hero works long hours to try to get things on track, while keeping the issue "under wraps." Typically, a hero mindset, or worse, a hero culture, backfires. A hero can't maintain the necessary level of effort and will likely burn out. Organizations cannot plan for heroes. The hero's effort and time is often performed in secret and sets unrealistic expectations. A hero status owner is reluctant to acknowledge an issue that could cause a delay and believes she has the skill to resolve problems on her own. The truth is, she typically doesn't. Issues worthy of red status usually require proper allocation of resources, decision-making and often authority beyond that of the status owner.

Be on the lookout for the "heroes" in your organization and seek to understand what is really driving that behavior.

The reality in a culture with "hero syndrome:"

Status Owner: Exhausted, frustrated, and overworked
Recipient: Appreciative; unknowingly has a larger issue on hand

Do any of these scenarios sound familiar? Politics, fear, and heroism may be masking the truth in a green or yellow status. Let's look at the alternative.

By going red:

- An issue is transparent; details become evident to all.
- An issue gains exposure and receives the necessary level of attention.

- An issue is escalated and the team acknowledges the need for additional support and assistance from stakeholders, including steering committees, executives, or the project sponsor. The sponsor may have access to resources and information beyond the team's reach.
- An issue is addressed with a sense of urgency. The team can put action plans in place, especially if there is an upstream, downstream, or tangential impact.
- An issue allows for assessment of impacts and adjustments to be made.
- An issue has the ability to attract the best and brightest resources until it is resolved.

These benefits are valuable to the status owner, the project team, the project sponsor, and the stakeholder community. It is one thing for the team and status owner to acknowledge they are "in the red" and another to share it openly with the project world. An organization that shifts its mindset from politics, fear, heroism — or a combination of the three — can identify and acknowledge issues early. Rather than hiding issues, it can focus on addressing problems efficiently and effectively.

Stick to the Facts

One of the most difficult questions a status owner faces is, "When should status turn red?" If the answer was simple, objective, and mathematical, it wouldn't generate so much anxiety. In reality, most organizations use a subjective approach. They consider the overall health of a project, using information such as the potential effect of risk, realized impact of issues, dependencies, milestone dates, compliance, and standards. A key step for any organization that uses

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this method of status reporting is to clearly define the conditions that would cause a status to be red. Status reports should be documented without bias and risk of repercussion. STICK TO THE FACTS!

Consider the following situations:

What if you don't go red? If you don't go red, you may mask issues, underestimate work, overwork resources, or worse. Don't try to do everything in your power to prevent red status. It can affect planning for future projects. By concealing a heroic effort to avoid red, you may cause future pain.

What if you go red too late? "Fail fast" is a common term in business. Most importantly, this allows the project to begin recovery planning. Options may be eliminated simply because time has passed. As time goes on, the cost of a course correction grows and may involve extensive rework.

What if you go red too often? Eventually, after receiving frequent red status reports, a status owner could become known as the "boy who cried red." The status isn't taken seriously. Resources that should go to higher priority activities could be wasted. The benefits aren't realized because the need isn't real.

The status owner must consider all the health components of a project when assigning status updates. Be consistent. Be rational. If red status is appropriate, accept it and promptly turn the project red. Force the team and others to accept and deal with the issue, using available tools and resources. Set the expectation that the team should raise and document all risks, issues, and challenges. Remember, it is not the existence of problems and issues that will cause a project to fail; it is how the problems and issues are addressed. All too often, delays in identifying and communicating problems cause them to build to the

point where they can no longer be easily repaired. There's a saying: "Bad news doesn't get better with time." Act now so recovery planning can begin.

A good rule of thumb: Avoid going red from green. Ideally, a project manager should foresee issues coming and develop a mitigation plan to manage the risk.

Maybe the greater fear should be of all green status reports all of the time. Are we not digging in deep enough and asking the right questions? Are we accepting a status report at face value? Are we being subjective rather than objective? Have we identified all dependencies and planned accordingly? Are we using the correct metrics and health indicators? If you continue to see green week after week, perhaps it is time to evaluate the status reporting process to ensure the product is serving the needs of its audience.

In the words of Dale Carnegie, "Inaction breeds doubt and fear. Action breeds confidence and courage. If you want to conquer fear, do not sit home and think about it. Go out and get busy." Embrace issues; go red and address them.

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