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ADVISORY

POINTS OF VIEW

The curse of rose-coloured glasses

When optimism creates organisational blindness

A project can hold every meeting, record every risk and still glow green while it fails.

It happens far too often in project land. A capable project leader leaves before the work is finished and attention immediately turns to the person who left. Their commitment is questioned, their resilience is debated and their departure becomes the explanation for why the project is struggling.

Maybe they found a better opportunity. Maybe they were not right for the role. Sometimes people simply leave. But experienced project leaders rarely walk away because the work is difficult. Pressure, complexity, competing priorities and difficult stakeholders are part of the deal. People tend to leave when the mess is no longer something they are managing and has instead become the way the project itself is managed.

The departure is often a symptom rather than the problem. The more important question is what the organisation had stopped seeing, or perhaps what it was no longer prepared to acknowledge. That is organisational blindness.

The curse of rose-coloured glasses is that anyone can wear them. Executives become attached to the outcome they have promised, while project managers become attached to the plan they have built and the belief that they can still recover it. Missed milestones become temporary delays, resource gaps are assumed to be manageable and decisions are expected to arrive just in time. Every issue has an explanation and every explanation allows the overall position to remain more positive than the evidence supports.

This can happen from the top down and the bottom up. Executives want reassurance that the project remains under control, while project managers want to demonstrate that they still have control. Both may genuinely believe the next decision, intervention or burst of effort will put things back on track.

The problem comes when those views reinforce each other. Executives accept the optimism because it suits the commitments already made, and project managers keep presenting recovery because they do not want to be seen as failing. Meanwhile, missed dates, overloaded people and unresolved dependencies continue building beneath the headline status.

Optimism has a place in leadership and project delivery. You need people who believe difficult things can be done and who are prepared to work through uncertainty rather than surrender at the first sign of trouble. But optimism still needs to survive contact with the evidence. When it causes people to minimise warnings, explain away missed milestones or ignore what the people closest to the work are saying, it becomes organisational blindness.

One of the clearest signs is a project report that never changes colour. As a leader, I liked seeing red in a project report because it told me the team was reporting with integrity, the issue was visible and there was still an opportunity to change the trajectory. Red was not failure. It was a call for a decision about whether to add resources, revise the scope, extend the timeframe or accept that the original commitment was no longer achievable.

Amber mattered for the same reason. It showed that delivery was at risk and that leadership still had time to intervene before the available options narrowed and recovery became harder. That is what RAG reporting is meant to provide: a clear and timely view of where decisions are needed.

What concerned me far more was a report that glowed green while missed milestones, delayed decisions and slipped dates sat in the detail underneath. The project was apparently green. You just had to ignore everything written on the page.

Sometimes this is blind optimism. Each missed date has an explanation, every unresolved issue has a mitigation and each dependency is described as manageable. Taken individually, they all sound plausible. Taken together, they describe a project that is no longer on track.

There can also be something more defensive going on. Project managers may soften amber and red because they do not want to be the person who declares that the plan is failing. Risks are qualified, dates remain unchanged and recovery is promised without a credible way forward. At its worst, reporting stops being decision support and becomes a tool for explaining a future failure.

Executives can fall into the same pattern. They accept optimistic reporting because it protects the commitment they approved, the deadline they announced or the decision they delayed. A green status allows everyone to keep moving without confronting whether the project remains achievable.

The project manager protects the plan. The executive protects the promise.

Neither needs to be deliberately misleading anyone. Self-protection is a fairly normal response when the environment treats bad news as personal failure. The report gradually becomes a version of events that nobody fully believes but everyone can point to later. The status was green, the risks were recorded and recovery remained possible.

That is where culture matters. Culture is not what the organisation says about openness, trust or accountability. It is what happens when someone puts an uncomfortable fact on the table. Does a red status trigger a useful decision, or an interrogation of the person who reported it? Do leaders deal with the underlying problem, or debate the colour until it becomes more comfortable?

People notice what makes meetings easier. If green allows everyone to move on while red attracts blame and hours of additional work, reporting will gradually become greener. If project managers are told they cannot call red until they have a complete recovery plan, red will be delayed until the failure is already obvious.

The culture of a project is often clearest in the gap between what is said in the governance meeting and what is said immediately afterwards. When the real status only appears in corridor conversations, private messages or calls after the meeting, governance is not getting the information it needs. At that point, the reporting process may still be operating, but it is no longer providing a reliable view of the project.

None of this removes individual responsibility. Project managers still need to report the position as it is, not the version that feels safest to present. They cannot control every dependency, resource or executive decision, but they can make the position clear. Once recovery is no longer credible, escalation means stating what must change, which decision is required and what will happen if it is not made. Continuing to promise recovery only delays meaningful intervention.

Executives have an equal responsibility. They need to hear uncomfortable information without immediately looking for someone to blame, asking for a more reassuring colour or sending the issue back to people without the authority to resolve it. They also need to be willing to revisit commitments and accept that the organisation may not have created the conditions needed for success.

Transparency has to work both ways. Project managers need to stop protecting the plan, and executives need to stop protecting the promise. That does not mean treating every setback as a crisis or celebrating red for its own sake. It means making it safer and more useful to raise a problem early than to explain it after the damage is done.

Good governance should make that possible. The presence of a steering committee, risk register and weekly report does not mean a project is well governed. Weak governance can look incredibly organised. Meetings happen, papers are circulated and actions are recorded, yet decisions remain unresolved and issues are repeatedly returned to people without the authority or resources to deal with them.

The machinery exists, but it is not doing anything useful.

Strong governance tests the headline colour against what is actually happening. It asks whether milestones are being met, whether decisions are being made, whether dependencies are moving and whether the right people are genuinely available. It then asks what must change for recovery to be credible, who has the authority to make that change and by when. Most importantly, it forces choices.

This becomes particularly important when the project depends on the business to deliver. It is a constant issue in government and increasingly across large enterprises. A project team is established, dates are committed and the plan assumes the business will provide the executives, subject matter experts, decisions and operational input required along the way.

Those same people are already responsible for running the organisation. Project workshops, design decisions, testing and implementation are added to workloads that were already full. The same people then become bottlenecks across multiple workstreams. The same executive is needed for several decisions, the same subject matter expert is required for design, testing and implementation, and the same operational manager is expected to release people while still meeting every service target.

BAU usually wins because its consequences are immediate. Customers are waiting, incidents need attention and operational targets still apply, while the cost of delaying project work often sits further into the future. The resulting delay is then treated as a project management problem when, in many cases, it reflects an organisational capacity decision that nobody was prepared to make explicitly.

Projects do not operate beside the business. They operate through it.

An organisation cannot claim transformation is a priority while leaving every operational priority, performance measure and resource commitment untouched. You cannot create capacity by adding another priority to an already full workload.

Strong governance should make that conflict visible and force a choice. Sometimes the answer is more resources, while at other times it may be less scope, a different sequence or the release of operational people for a defined period. Sometimes the timeframe simply has to move. Sometimes senior leaders need to make the decision themselves rather than repeatedly handing it back to the project.

The solution is not another reporting template, refreshed plan or new project manager. It is a culture and governance model capable of recognising an uncomfortable position, making a decision and acting before the options disappear.

Instead of asking whether the project is still on track, ask what would need to be true for the plan to succeed and whether those things are actually true. Instead of asking why the team is struggling, ask which decisions, resources or authority have not been provided. Instead of immediately questioning why someone left, ask what they could see that the organisation was unwilling or unable to see.

One departure may be personal, but several departures are data. Repeated turnover, burnout and disengagement should prompt a review of the project environment rather than another explanation about individual commitment or resilience.

That does not mean every person who leaves was right, every project manager is capable or every failing project is the fault of executives. Projects are difficult, people make mistakes, plans fail and assumptions prove wrong. The point is not to eliminate failure. It is to build an organisation capable of recognising it early, learning from it and responding before more damage is done.

A strong project culture is not one where everything remains green. It is one where nothing important stays hidden. Project managers need to be brave enough to put the evidence on the table, and executives need to be brave enough to make the decision it demands.

The brave decision is not always to keep pushing. Sometimes it is to stop, reset, reduce the scope, change direction or acknowledge that the original commitment can no longer be met. That is not weakness. It is responsible leadership.

Failure only becomes an opportunity to improve when an organisation is prepared to understand what happened, accept its contribution and change what happens next. Strong governance creates room to be wrong early, while fearless transparency makes that information useful when there is still time to act.

Blind optimism is an investment in mediocrity.