Green Is a Report About the Reporter

Auditing the red-amber-green status as a fitness claim

By Mario Aiello

A status light is the only indicator on the dashboard that someone has to be brave to change.

Red, amber, green. A person who owns the work looks at it each week and picks a colour. It is quick, it fits on one slide, and a steering committee can read forty projects in ten minutes. The audit asks what the colour answers.

What the number answers

On fit for what, green means on plan. It does not mean the plan is right. A project can be delivered on time, to budget and to specification, and still be the wrong project. The colour cannot register that, because the plan is the thing it is measured against.

On fit for context, the thresholds are rarely defined. What makes a project amber in one programme makes it green in the next, and the colour changes meaning from slide to slide.

On fit for how, it is self-reported. The person choosing the colour is the person who will be asked about it. Of the instruments in this series, this is the one where the reading depends most on how safe it is for the reader to be honest.

On fit until when, it is a snapshot. It describes last Thursday and is read on Monday.

So the status light answers whether the owner is willing to say the project is in trouble, and presumes the other three.

Why the instrument produces its own silence

Here it differs from the other indicators in the series. Velocity and utilisation hide failure because they measure the wrong thing. The status light hides failure because it measures something real, the reporter's confidence, and confidence is shaped by what happens to people who report bad news.

Where the reaction to amber is a series of questions and a visit from the programme office, owners wait. They wait for a recovery, a lucky break or a few more days to fix it quietly. The colour goes amber late and red later, and by then the options have narrowed. The indicator was supposed to show friction. In this system it filters friction out before anyone sees it.

That is Hidden Misfit manufactured by the instrument. It reads fine because the reading is controlled by people with every reason to keep it fine.

Where this stops

In an organization where bad news is welcomed, the same light can be honest and useful. I am not describing every reporting culture. This is desk work, and the argument cannot tell you whether your own organization is one of the good ones.

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A test is available. Look back at the last ten projects that failed and see how long each stayed green. The time between the first honest doubt and the first amber is the real measurement, and it says more about the organization than the light ever did.

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