THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

Your Status Report Is Green, But It Just Added Five Weeks of Delay to Your Program

At GPMF in Riyadh, a lot of my conversations with PMO leaders came back to one delay. Something one engineer knows on day 0 can take five or six weeks to reach someone who can make a decision about it.

Vassily Yasmine November 13, 2026



In September, PMO and portfolio leaders from across Saudi Arabia met in Riyadh for the Global Project Management Forum (GPMF). With so many Vision 2030 programs now in delivery, the question of why large programs still slip came up often.

Large programs fail at about the same rate they have for decades. A lot of my conversations at GPMF ended up on the same point. Something one engineer knows on day 0 can take five or six weeks to reach someone who can make a decision about it, and the status report often stays green the whole time.

THE DELAY

The five-week delay built into most governance

If you follow one risk through a typical monthly governance cycle, you can see where the time goes.

EXHIBIT 1

How long one risk takes to reach a decision

SOMEONE NOTICES	Day 0. An engineer sees a dependency slipping.
WEEKLY UPDATE	Adds up to 1 week. The project manager decides whether it is worth reporting yet.
PROGRAM ROLL-UP	Adds 1 to 2 weeks. The PMO consolidates updates and tones down the language for the program view.
STEERING COMMITTEE	Adds up to 4 weeks. The monthly meeting arrives, and the item sits on page 14 of the pack.
DECISION	Often not until the following meeting. Action is agreed and an owner is named.

The governance timeline is illustrative.

McKinsey and the University of Oxford found that each extra year of duration added about 15% to cost overruns,[1] so on a large program every week of waiting costs money.

The message also gets softer on the way up, because each person who handles the report has a reason to tone it down. The project manager wants another week to recover, the program lead doesn't want to worry the sponsor, and there's only so much room in the steering committee pack. People call this watermelon reporting, green on the outside and red on the inside.

THE NUMBERS

Everyone knows the numbers

The usual statistics came up again in Riyadh. Bain's 2024 research found that 88% of business transformations fall short of their original ambitions.[2] The same McKinsey and Oxford study looked at

5,400 large IT projects and found they ran 45% over budget on average and delivered 56% less value than predicted.[1]

EXHIBIT 2

The numbers every leader already knows

88%	45%	56%
of business transformations fall short of their original ambitions.	average budget overrun across 5,400 large IT projects.	less value delivered than predicted, on average.
BAIN & COMPANY, 2024	MCKINSEY AND UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD	MCKINSEY AND UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Nobody in the room was surprised. We've all seen these numbers for years, and in that time better methods and more training haven't changed them much.

THE USUAL RESPONSE

The usual fix is a thicker plan

When a program slips, the standard response is more planning. Teams add detail and milestones, the risk register gets longer, and sometimes another review layer is added.

Meanwhile the status report stays green until the week it turns red. By then it's usually too late to do much, and the cost shows up as rework, delay and scope creep. We call this the *Late Risk Discovery* gap, and across the portfolios we see it costs about 2.5% of EBITDA.[3]

THE INCENTIVE

Bad news costs the person who reports it

A lot of the discussion at the forum came back to this. In the organizations I work with, someone usually has the information. It just doesn't get passed up.

A project manager who flags a slipping milestone has to explain it, defend it and often take the blame for it. When a decision is shared across four roles in a responsibility matrix, nobody fully owns the outcome, so nobody feels it's their job to raise it.

> Most people want to report honestly. The way reporting is set up just makes it costly for them.
>
> **Vassily Yasmine**
> Senior Account Manager, Sensei Labs

EARLY SIGNALS

Signals that move before the status color

The teams that find risk early don't wait for a status color to change. They watch for signals that show up weeks earlier.

EXHIBIT 3

Five signals that move weeks earlier

DEPENDENCY SLIPS	A milestone upstream moved, even if yours has not yet.
DECISION LATENCY	Approvals are waiting longer than agreed.
BURN VS. PROGRESS	Spend is on plan while deliverables fall behind.
RESOURCE CHURN	Key people are being pulled onto other work.
CHANGE REQUESTS	Scope pressure is building in one area.

You can see each of these in the work itself, without waiting for someone to volunteer bad news.

WHAT HELPS

Governance that lowers the cost of bad news

- Status drawn from the work itself, so nobody has to decide whether to report bad news
- Milestones linked to their dependencies, so a slip upstream shows downstream the same day
- One named owner for each outcome
- Risks written as scenarios, each with a trigger and a decision date

- A standing escalation slot in every governance meeting, so raising an issue is routine

This is how governance works in Conductor, alongside the work as it happens. Harmony AI reads these signals across the whole portfolio and flags risk within days, while there's still time to do something about it. A major utility in France classifies every schedule delay in Conductor when it happens and reviews it at each stage gate, so they can see drift early enough to re-plan.

NEXT STEP

Before your next steering committee

When did a status report last change a decision in your organization? If you have to think hard about it, the reporting cycle is probably worth a closer look.

If it would help, we can take two or three of your live initiatives, pull their status straight from the work, and compare it with what your current pack shows.

Your strategy deserves a platform that can keep up

See how Conductor connects your strategic plan to the people, projects, and KPIs that make it real.

Book a Demo

Sources

[1] McKinsey & Company and University of Oxford, "Delivering large-scale IT projects on time, on budget, and on value," 2012.

[2] Bain & Company, "88% of business transformations fail to achieve their original ambitions," April 2024.

[3] Sensei Labs, Four Gaps analysis of client portfolios.

Frequently asked questions

What is watermelon reporting?

A status report that looks green on the outside while the program is red on the inside, usually because each reporting layer softens bad news before it reaches decision makers.

Why do program risks reach leadership so late?

In a typical monthly governance cycle, a risk passes through weekly updates, a program roll-up and a steering committee. That can add five or six weeks before anyone makes a decision about it.

Which signals show program risk before the status color changes?

Dependency slips, decision latency, spend running ahead of deliverables, key people being pulled onto other work, and clusters of change requests in one area.

READ ONLINE

Read this article on our website

getconductor.com/resources/your-status-report-is-green-but-it-just-added-five-weeks-of-delay-to-your-program

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