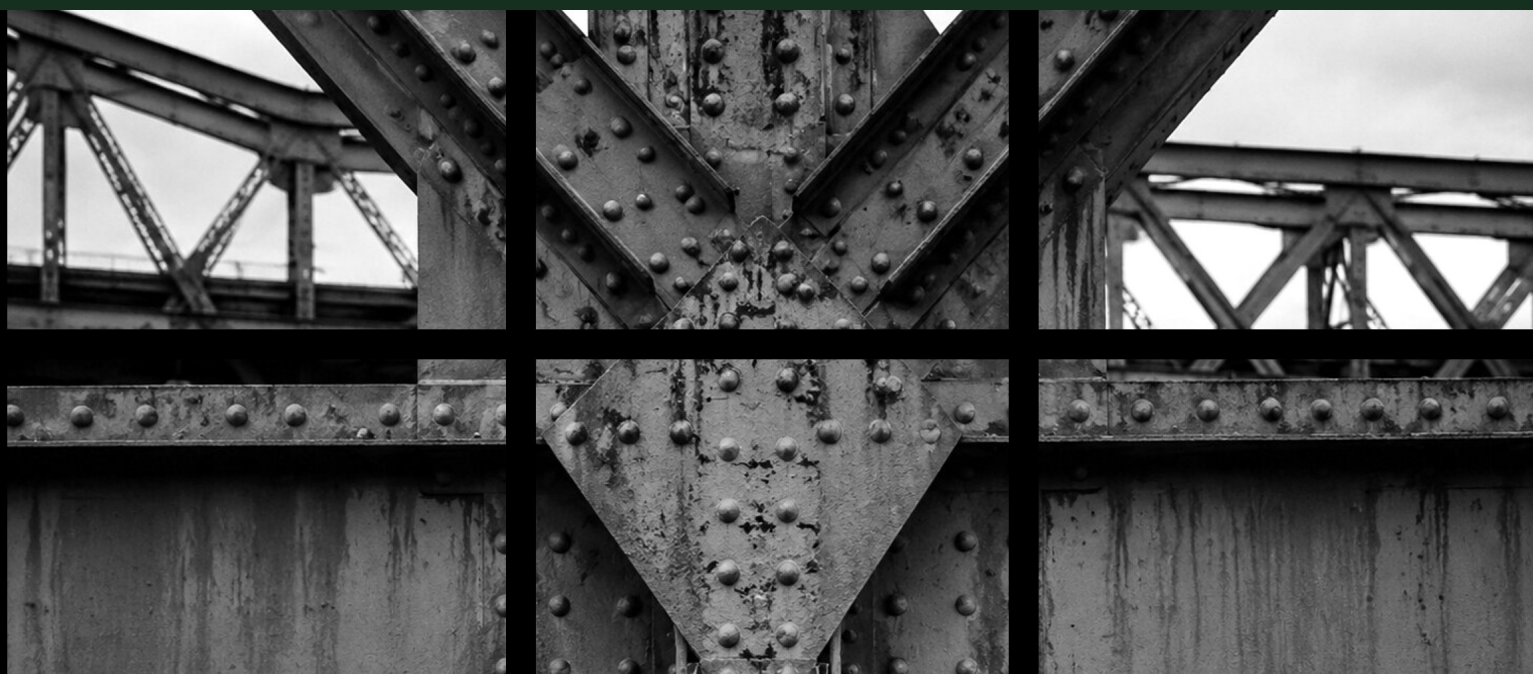


BEYOND THE TRAFFIC LIGHT

# RAG Status — The Most Dangerous Three Colours in Programme Management

*A Practitioner's Perspective on the Illusion of Control in Complex Programmes*



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# RAG Status — The Most Dangerous Three Colours in Programme Management

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*“The moment a programme board spends more time debating the colour of a status than the substance behind it, the reporting system has ceased to inform and begun to deceive.”*

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## 1. The Comfort of Three Colours

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There is a particular kind of comfort that programme boards derive from the RAG status report. It arrives weekly, sometimes fortnightly, in a format so familiar that most recipients could sketch it from memory: a grid of workstreams, each assigned a colour — Red, Amber, or Green — with perhaps a line or two of commentary alongside. It is neat. It is digestible. And in my experience, it is one of the most consistently misleading artefacts in programme management.

The appeal is obvious. Senior leaders overseeing complex programmes — often alongside a dozen other priorities — need a mechanism that compresses complexity into something they can absorb in minutes. RAG status promises exactly this. It says: here is the health of your programme, reduced to a palette a child could interpret. Green means safe. Amber means watch. Red means act.

The trouble is that programmes are not traffic lights. And the act of compression that makes RAG status so appealing is precisely what makes it dangerous.

## 2. What RAG Actually Measures

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The first problem is definitional. Ask five programme managers what constitutes an Amber status and you will receive five different answers. Some define it by schedule variance — a threshold of days or weeks of slippage. Others define it by risk exposure, by budget consumption, by stakeholder sentiment, or by some intuitive blend of all four. There is rarely a shared, calibrated definition across a programme, let alone across an organisation.

This matters more than it might appear. When the same colour means different things to different people, the aggregated view that reaches the programme board is not a synthesis — it is a collision of incompatible judgements presented as though they were consistent. The board sees a row of Greens and concludes that the programme is healthy. What they are actually seeing is that six different workstream leads, applying six different standards, have each independently decided that their area does not yet warrant escalation.

## 3. The Gravitational Pull of Green

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The second problem is behavioural, and it is the more corrosive of the two. In every programme environment I have observed, there is an unmistakable gravitational pull towards Green. The reasons are structural, not personal. A workstream lead who reports Amber or Red knows that they will face scrutiny — not the constructive kind, but the kind that consumes time, generates additional reporting demands, and marks them out as the person with the problem. The rational response, learned quickly, is to stay Green for as long as possible.

This creates a pattern that recurs with remarkable consistency: statuses remain Green until the moment they cannot be defended any longer, at which point they leap directly to Red. The Amber zone — which in theory exists precisely to provide early warning — is compressed almost to nothing. Programme boards experience this as sudden, unexpected crises emerging from apparently healthy programmes. The reality is that the warning signs were present for weeks or months, but the reporting system was structurally incapable of surfacing them.

*The Amber zone — designed as the early warning mechanism — is the first casualty of a culture that penalises honesty. When reporting bad news carries a cost, the rational actor reports good news until concealment is no longer possible.*

#### 4. The Aggregation Fallacy

Perhaps the most insidious feature of RAG status is how it aggregates. A programme with twelve workstreams, eleven Green and one Red, will typically be reported as Amber at the programme level. This feels reasonable — one problem area dragging the overall status down a notch. But it conceals a critical question: is the Red workstream on the critical path? If it is, the programme is not Amber — it is Red, regardless of how many other workstreams are performing well. If it is not, the programme may genuinely be Green despite the localised difficulty.

RAG status, by its nature, cannot express this distinction. It flattens interdependency, critical path, and systemic risk into a single dimension. A programme board looking at an aggregated Amber has no way to distinguish between a programme with a contained peripheral problem and one whose central delivery mechanism is failing. Both look the same.

The same flattening occurs across time. A workstream that has been Amber for eight consecutive weeks tells a very different story from one that turned Amber yesterday. But in the standard RAG report, both appear identically. The trend — which is often far more informative than the current state — is invisible unless someone has gone to the trouble of maintaining a separate view.

#### 5. What Boards Actually Need

The question, then, is what would serve programme boards better. I do not believe the answer is more granular RAG — adding sub-categories, weighted scores, or decimal precision to a fundamentally flawed model does not address the underlying problem. Nor is the answer to abandon status reporting altogether; boards need a mechanism for oversight, and they need it to be efficient.

What I have seen work — imperfectly, but materially better — is a shift from status to trajectory. Instead of asking "where are we?" the board asks "where are we heading, and what has changed since last time?" This reframes the conversation from a static snapshot to a dynamic assessment. It makes trend visible. It makes the rate of change visible. And critically, it changes the incentive structure: a workstream lead reporting a negative trajectory while the current position is still manageable is providing early warning, not admitting failure.

- Trajectory over status: report the direction and rate of change, not just the current position
- Exceptions over summaries: focus board attention on what has changed and what needs decision, not on confirming that unchanged areas remain unchanged
- Narrative over colour: require a brief written assessment that the workstream lead must own in person, replacing the anonymity of a colour with the accountability of a statement
- Critical path visibility: ensure the board can always see which workstreams sit on the critical path and which do not, so that a Red in a peripheral area is not treated with the same urgency as a Red on the spine of the programme

## 6. The Deeper Issue

Beneath all of this lies a more fundamental problem: the assumption that programme health can be meaningfully communicated through a simple classification scheme at all. Complex programmes are systems — they exhibit emergent behaviour, non-linear dynamics, and feedback loops that resist simple categorisation. The desire to reduce this to three colours is understandable, but it reflects a model of programme oversight that belongs to a simpler era of project management, one in which scope was fixed, environments were stable, and delivery was largely a matter of execution against plan.

The programmes most organisations are running today — large-scale technology-enabled transformations, regulatory change programmes, multi-year capability builds — do not fit this model. They are characterised by uncertainty, interdependence, and constant adaptation. The oversight mechanisms they require must be capable of expressing this complexity, not concealing it.

*RAG status belongs to an era of project management in which scope was fixed and delivery was execution against plan. The programmes organisations run today demand oversight mechanisms that can express complexity, not conceal it.*

I am not suggesting that every programme board needs to become a seminar in systems thinking. But I am suggesting that the gap between what RAG status communicates and what boards need to know has grown wide enough to be genuinely dangerous. The organisations that recognise this — and invest in reporting mechanisms that privilege trajectory, narrative, and critical path visibility over the false comfort of three colours — will make better decisions. The rest will continue to be surprised by failures that were hiding in plain sight, one Green cell at a time.