Don't Manage Bad News: The Delivery Lead's Half of the Bargain [1]

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Abstract

Most advice on status reporting assumes the delivery lead is in a position to push back. In government that is often not the case. The person who knows the true state of a program is usually an EL1 or EL2, or a contractor, and the person who owns the date sits in the Senior Executive Service. This article uses the gap between Formula One team radio and telemetry to look at how bad news gets softened on the way up, often described as putting it into "ministerial language", and why program boards so rarely see what was taken out. It draws on the author's years working beside government delivery teams as a consultant, and on public audit reports from the United Kingdom and Victoria. It argues that the delivery lead's real lever is the project record, and offers a simple test for telling careful wording apart from going along.

The sponsor asked me during an online meeting to change the wording of my status report. I was a consultant on the program and the report was mine, and he wanted the assessment toned down before it went any further up the line. I said no. I told him it was my report, and if the organisation wanted a different account of the program, they were welcome to write one internally.

He took it to my manager at the firm I was engaged through. My manager already knew I was not going to change it, and as far as I know that was the end of it. He had made the same request of other people before me, and they had changed theirs.

I wrote in an earlier article for this journal (Oppong, 2026) that success in public sector programs starts above the delivery team, with the sponsor. This one is for the person a level down, the program or project lead, the head of the PMO, or the contractor running delivery. You are the one carrying the news up, and once it leaves your hands you have very little say over what happens to it.

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Radio and Telemetry

I am a Formula One fan and an Aston Martin supporter, which means a lot of Sunday nights listening to team radio, more than I would like given the results. Every car in a race gives two accounts of itself. There is the radio, where the engineer tells the driver the gap, the plan and how the tyres are going. Then there is the telemetry, thousands of readings a second on brake temperatures, tyre wear and fuel, which keeps recording no matter what is said on the radio.

Most of the managing happens on the radio. "Tyres are looking fine, keep pushing" might be true, or it might be that the pit wall has already decided to stay out and nobody wants to tell the driver how bad it is. Meanwhile the telemetry keeps recording tyre wear whatever anyone says on the radio.

Status reporting in government works much the same way, and the gap between those two accounts is what this article is about.

The Argument Is About the Date

My public sector work has been on the consultant side. I have worked beside government delivery teams for years without running their programs, and from that seat you hear things people will not put in a report. What I have seen is that when there is an argument about the wording of a status report, it is nearly always an argument about a date.

Sometimes the date went up months ago and nobody believes it any more. Sometimes the date is being pushed through while the change management is nowhere near ready for it, so requirements get rushed and training gets squeezed into the last fortnight. Whichever it is, the report that says so plainly is the one somebody wants reworded.

The request rarely arrives as a request to change the facts. It arrives as a matter of style. The report needs to be put into "ministerial language", or "public sector language", before it goes up. I have watched sponsors do this, and I have watched program managers do it to their own team's reports. The edits follow a familiar pattern. A date that cannot be met becomes a schedule under pressure. Go-live criteria that were not met get described as work in progress.

This works because it looks like editing. Nobody wants to be the person holding up a report over a choice of words, so the change goes through and the substance shifts without anyone deciding to shift it. I have never seen a meeting where officials agree to tell the executive something untrue, and I do not think one happens. What happens is the report comes back with tracked changes and a thank-you note, and the program is now amber instead of red. That is how managing bad news usually goes, and I would say most of the people involved would be offended if you called it lying.

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My view in those conversations has been the same for years. There is no point meeting the date if we do not get the outcome. If the system is switched on, the staff have not been trained and nobody has signed off the data, you have met a date and that is about it. Most sponsors know this. Their difficulty is that the date is the thing they promised, usually to someone more senior who has since promised it to someone else.

A Go-Live with Almost Nobody in It

The clearest case I have seen involved a new system and a sponsor who had promised the organisation a date for it. The date could not be met.

The sponsor declared a "soft go-live". On the promised date the system would go live for the PMO team, one section of the organisation, and everyone else would come on later. A real song and dance was made about it, and the date was treated as achieved.

In reality it was a no go-live. Most of the people the system was built for were not on it. Put in racing terms, the car had come out of the garage and gone as far as the end of the pit lane, and the team was telling everyone the race had started.

What I keep coming back to is who came up with the name. It was the sponsor, the same person who had made the promise in the first place. That makes the delivery lead's job harder, because keeping your own reports straight is no longer enough. When someone above you renames a failure, you still need the record to show what was actually delivered and who decided to call it something else.

Who Can Actually Say No

The easy thing would be for me to tell program leads to just refuse. I could refuse, and I will come back to why. Most of the people this article is written for cannot, or cannot in the same way.

In the Australian Public Service the program or project lead is usually an Executive Level 1 or 2, an EL1 or EL2. Readers in the United Kingdom can think of Grade 7 and Grade 6. The sponsor sits in the Senior Executive Service, roughly the Senior Civil Service. In a delivery unit in Nairobi or a department in Ottawa the titles change and the gap does not. The race engineer can see the telemetry. The team principal makes the call.

Contractors are worse placed. A contractor running delivery reports to a sponsor who also decides whether the contract is renewed. I have seen strong-headed sponsors push a date through against the advice of their project manager and then replace the project manager. I have seen it many times, with program leads as well.

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There are plenty of sponsors who do listen to advice, and I have worked with a lot of them. The advice in this article still has to work for the lead whose sponsor will not listen, because that is the lead who needs it.

What the Good Ones Do

The best program leads I have watched start with the sponsor, in private, well before they touch the record. There is no audience and there are no minutes. They say it plainly: that is not a good idea, and here is what will happen in the business if we do it. Said in private, it leaves the sponsor room to change course without being seen to lose. A good race engineer makes the same call to the pit wall before the tyres go, while there is still a choice to make.

Then they push the sponsor to go back. The date was promised to someone, whether a board or a minister's office. The most useful thing a sponsor can do is return to that someone and renegotiate, or confirm a different date, while there is still time to do it with dignity. The lead can help by turning up with the numbers and showing what moving the date by three months would actually get them.

When that does not work, and often it does not, they keep the telemetry. They put the true story in the one place they control, which is the project record. They word it so the senior reader who only reads the top line is satisfied, and anyone who goes one layer deeper finds out what is really going on.

I would put this in the same category as refusing outright, done by someone with less power. My refusal kept my reading of the program on the record, and a carefully written project record does that for its author too. The difference is how far down the page the truth sits, and a lead whose job depends on the sponsor will usually not put it in the first line.

There is a point where careful wording turns into going along, and there is a simple test for it. Does the top line survive one question? "Deployed to the PMO user group on 30 June" does. Ask who is using the system and the sentence still holds. "Went live on 30 June" falls over as soon as someone asks. The soft go-live was on the wrong side of that test.

Let us look at what this means on the page. The entries below are illustrations I have written for this article. They show the kind of entry that does this work, and none is taken from a program I have seen.

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A status line might read:

> *Release 1 deployed to the PMO user group on 30 June. Go-live criteria 4 (business readiness) and 7 (data migration sign-off) not met. Wider rollout date to be confirmed.*

A decision log might carry:

> *D-09: Proceed with 30 June release at reduced scope. Advice: delivery team recommended 30 September to complete user acceptance testing. Decision: Program Sponsor.*

The risk register might hold:

> *R-14: Fixed release date compresses change and training activity. Likelihood high. Impact: delayed benefits. Treatment: phased adoption. Residual risk accepted by Program Sponsor, 12 May.*

And the schedule would show:

> *Forecast 30 September (baseline 30 June).*

Every one of these is polite, and none would embarrass a sponsor in a board pack. The status line starts with what was actually achieved. The decision log does not blame anyone. It records what the advice was and who made the call. If you read the four entries together, you can see the release was partial and the date was picked against the delivery team's advice.

The schedule line is worth a closer look. Good leads re-forecast and leave the baseline alone, even when a new baseline would make the slip disappear. With the forecast sitting next to the original baseline, anyone can see how far the program has drifted. Re-baseline it and the gap is gone, and the next board has no reason to ask what happened, which is the problem the Victorian auditors found (more on that below).

If you write entries like these, you have still done what the sponsor asked, on the sponsor's date. You have just written down that it was the sponsor's decision. If the phased rollout works out, the record shows the sponsor made a good call against cautious advice, and they can take the credit for it. A sponsor who pushes back on an entry like D-09 is really pushing back on being named as the person who decided, and that is another conversation to have in private.

Who Reads the Telemetry

Mostly nobody, at least not while it could still change anything.

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Gateway reviews and program boards are meant to read it. In practice the board is often run by the PMO, and the sponsor sits on it and sometimes chairs it. A board may have ten to twenty projects in front of it at a sitting. It has no time for detail, so it spends the time it has on the projects that already look in trouble. A project reworded to amber or green is never examined.

The record usually gets read in one of two situations. One is an audit, because auditors have the time. The other is when the project has gone south and someone is brought in to work out why. In racing terms that is the stewards' room or the Monday debrief, when someone finally reads the telemetry next to the radio transcript.

Public audit reports give a good idea of what that reader finds. The UK National Audit Office (2013) looked at the early years of the Universal Credit programme at the Department for Work and Pensions. It found the department did not have adequate measures of progress, and that the programme board had relied on external reviews to work out where things stood. The auditors described "a culture of 'good news' reporting" that limited open discussion of risk. The national roll-out planned for October 2013 did not go ahead as planned, and the pathfinder that did go ahead was narrower in scope than intended.

In 2016 the Victorian Auditor-General's Office (2016) examined six public sector ICT projects. In two of them it found that timelines had been re-baselined several times when deadlines were not met. Once that happens, the auditors observed, the reported status moves from "'delayed' (red) to 'on track' (green)", and it becomes difficult to tell how the project is performing against the dates originally approved. They added that this is a particular problem when the membership of a board or committee changes.

I would underline that last observation. By the time the record is read, the people have moved on. The sponsor has been promoted or has left. The program lead has gone to the next program, and if the lead was a contractor, that is usually where the blame lands, on someone who is not around to answer for it. The record stays with the PMO. By then the program may have been restructured, merged into another one, handed to a different part of the business, or put on hold until the funding comes back.

I do not think there is a villain in this. Senior people are ambitious, and they should be. The system rewards whoever announced the date and has very little to offer the person who wrote down why it slipped. A sponsor who softens a report is responding to what is in front of them, and I reckon most of us would feel the same pull sitting in that chair.

So I would not tell a program lead that the record will protect them, because it rarely does. It is written for whoever picks up the work later: the next project manager wondering why the baseline says June, the PMO asked to explain the history, the auditor, and the team that restarts the program two years on. They open the decision log and the risk register

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because that is all that is left, and what they find there has a lot to do with whether they make the same mistake.

What the Refusal Rested On

I never found out what happened to my report. It left me the way I wrote it. Whether it went up in that form or someone reworded it after it left my hands, I do not know. Once a document leaves you it can go a long way past where you can see it.

I do not think saying no took much courage on my part. I could do it because of where I sat. I was engaged through my firm and the sponsor had not hired me. If he had brought me into his branch directly he would have had a lot more say over me, and I cannot tell you for sure what I would have done then. What I write, I believe in, and I will defend it with the numbers and how I read them. At the end of the day it is my interpretation of how the program is running. You can think differently, but that is my interpretation. That is a much easier sentence to say to someone who does not decide your future.

An EL2 does not have that arrangement, and a contractor has even less. Years ago an old senior project manager gave me some advice I have kept ever since. "Paul, don't manage bad news." What he meant was do not massage it, just pass it on.

For the lead with no protection, my advice is to play it smart. Talk to the sponsor in private, in a way that does not implicate you, and put the plain version in the record. Then do the same on the next program, and the one after. Over time people learn that what you report is what is happening, and even a sponsor who did not enjoy hearing it will come to value that. After a while you stop getting overruled, and people know what they are getting when they bring you onto a project. It works the same on the pit wall, where the engineer a driver listens to is usually the one who called the last few races right.

You build that kind of standing slowly, one piece of bad news at a time. Mine came with the engagement, and it only went as far as my own outbox. Somewhere in a file there is a version of that status report. I still do not know whether it is the one I wrote.

AI Use Declaration

AI tools were used to improve language and readability. The ideas, examples and arguments are the author's.

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