

H4 Consulting Brief

Red is Good

Publicly funded organisations are often criticised for working slowly and deliberately, taking 'too long' to deliver political and community expectations. For people working in these organisations, the culture is rarely geared for rapid identification and swift resolution of concerns before they become crises. In risk averse organisations, raising a 'red flag' is often seen as a sign of failure, rather than a warning flare to prompt early, corrective action.

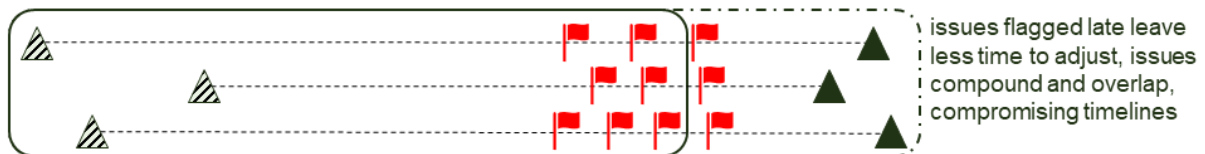
Publicly funded organisations are subject to public scrutiny, which can create pressure to report only success. Perversely, high levels of transparency can discourage raising issues for fear of criticism. Workers may try to manage issues themselves, with mixed success, instead of escalating to busy executives. This contributes to delays where problems that could have been addressed quickly, if escalated, compound into bigger issues that take longer to resolve. It also causes knock-on delays for later stages of the work.

Even when an issue is escalated, many publicly funded organisations have decision and feedback mechanisms geared for rigorous interrogation of ideas, rather than rapid resolution. Executives may, therefore, dedicate substantial time to exploring and resolving what has now become a significant issue.

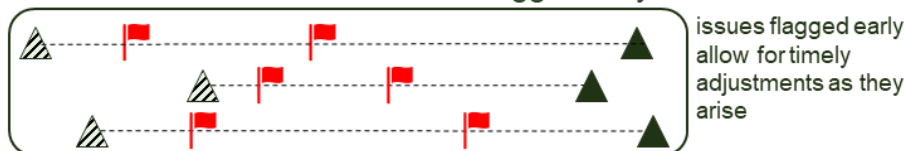
Workers cannot be expected to resolve all possible issues, some of which require executive intervention. When these issues are not escalated promptly, they can 'snowball', becoming larger and more serious. By the time an issue is eventually escalated, it may be difficult to resolve, and require substantial time and resources. Late identification of issues means that executives can only make the time to consider and respond to issues thoughtfully by delaying delivery.

A last-minute rush to solve problems is frustrating for everyone involved. It also tends to create inefficient rework where executives unpick the earlier efforts of workers, with little time for coaching or explanation. This limits learning opportunities for workers to collaborate with executives to resolve issues early, without intense time pressure and fear of criticism.

work over time when problems are flagged late



work over time when issues are flagged early



A red flag can be a good thing. Early signalling of any issue that may delay or disrupt important plans enables a feedback loop that simultaneously works faster and feels less rushed. Acting early to escalate and resolve issues before they become crises reduces the effort and time required to both resolve issues and deliver the outcome.

Early signals notify others, including peers and decision makers, of the potential need to adjust while there is still time and space to reallocate resources and get back on track, or recalibrate plans and expectations.

Brief windows for insight into emerging issues also help to inform executive actions and decisions, where required, that are both faster and more effective.

A culture where red is good maximises the time available to resolve issues thoughtfully, increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes and prompt delivery of priorities that are subject to public scrutiny. Rapid escalation also limits the snowballing damage that an issue can create if left unchecked, reducing inefficiency due to later rework and extra effort.

People in a culture where red is good are supported to succeed, rather than punished for failure. Executives have more time to engage early and coach workers. A red is good culture recognises that, while things do not always go according to plan, the key priority is collaborating to achieve goals, including deadlines. A cooperative and transparent culture recognises that, compared with raising a white flag when it's already too late, raising an early red flag is very good indeed.

To find out more about how you can use this approach in your organisation, contact us: info@h4consulting.com.au
Find additional resources at www.h4consulting.com.au/resources