Seeing Risk While Everything Still Looks “Green”

Most major project failures are not caused by missing controls, poor tools, or a lack of effort. They happen because leaders are shown the wrong signals for too long.

Dashboards reassure.

Reporting stays green.

Governance activity increases.

Meanwhile, real pressure builds quietly – outside the reporting frame.

This handout highlights the patterns leaders often notice before a project becomes visibly distressed – and how to surface them earlier.

THE PROBLEM WITH FAMILIAR METRICS

Most dashboards capture activity, not vulnerability.

They show:
- progress against plan
- volume of decisions
- compliance with process
- milestones met and artefacts produced

They rarely show:
- exposure created as options narrow
- assumptions hardening without challenge
- confidence rising while room to manoeuvre disappears
- growing dependence on outcomes that have not yet been tested

The most consequential risks rarely appear in slide decks.

EARLY SIGNALS LEADERS OFTEN NOTICE

These are not red flags in a register. They are recognition cues – subtle shifts in behaviour and tone.

Common examples include:
- Progress is reported, but exposure is not discussed
- Decisions are repeatedly deferred “until the next phase”
- Governance becomes busier without becoming clearer
- Risks are handled procedurally rather than candidly
- Stakeholders disengage quietly
- Testing confirms effort, not readiness

Individually, these signals can seem manageable.

In combination, they rarely are.

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THREE QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE EVERYTHING STILL LOOKS “GREEN”

The issue is rarely bad intent or missing data. The earliest signals of instability tend to appear in places that reporting systems are not designed to capture — in hesitation, behaviour, and silence.

The three questions below are meant to surface those signals while everything still looks “green.” They are not diagnostic tools or checklists. They are prompts for judgment, intended to be used occasionally, honestly, and without ceremony.

QUESTION 1: THE DECISION TEST

What decision would we delay if we were being completely honest about uncertainty right now?

Leaders often delay decisions instinctively when something feels off, even if they can’t yet explain why. Formal reporting rarely captures hesitation, because hesitation is not framed as a risk or an issue. It is framed as prudence.

But patterns of delay can be one of the earliest indicators that confidence is eroding beneath the surface.

Where are we “waiting for more information” — and what might that actually mean?

QUESTION 2: THE SILENCE TEST

What concern is no longer being raised – not because it’s resolved, but because it’s uncomfortable?

Teams learn quickly which concerns gain traction and which ones don’t. Over time, escalation is replaced by silence, not because risks disappear, but because raising them no longer feels productive.

When reporting remains stable but debate fades, it’s often a sign that people are adapting their behaviour rather than confronting uncertainty.

What topic used to generate discussion that now barely gets mentioned?

QUESTION 3: THE NARRATIVE TEST

If this project failed in 12 months, what would we say we should have paid more attention to?

Looking back from an imagined failure can bypass optimism and defensiveness. It creates space to acknowledge weak signals that leaders may already sense but haven’t yet named.

The value of this question is not in crafting a perfect answer, but in noticing which concern surfaces first — before it is edited, softened, or explained away.

What’s the first answer that comes to mind?

JUDGEMENT BEYOND THE DASHBOARD

These questions are not meant to replace reporting, assurance, or formal controls. They exist to complement them — by drawing attention to signals that appear *before* metrics move and dashboards change colour.

Used sparingly and with discipline, they can help leaders intervene earlier, when options are still available and course correction is less disruptive.