So, is your favourite "risk thing" any good?

A quick test of whether a risk tool will likely help or become Barnacle Risk Management.

At the Risk Management Institution of Australasia's annual national conference in late April 2026, I spoke about a few issues I see limiting our profession's ability to deliver bigger, better real-world outcomes.

The title of my presentation was "Sacred Cows and Kool-Aid: Rescuing risk management from its own mythology". Two of the sacred cows I targeted were likelihood-consequence-severity matrices and stand-alone risk registers. The response was illuminating:

- A few in the audience, and the subsequent LinkedIn discussion, were appalled I had challenged such sensible, eminent, long-standing, and very appropriate risk management "established practice". Clearly, I was some kind of risk management anarchist running around setting fire to things I didn't understand.
- Others, including many in the broader and international risk community, were deeply and enthusiastically supportive, and in a few cases concerned that I felt the need to even mention these putrid and ancient aberrations. "*Being anti risk register isn't really significant. The fact that they don't work has been known for years.*" wrote someone who reposted my article.

My opening remarks at the conference went along the lines of "I love the diversity and richness of the tools that risk management offers. I don't like it though when people are critical of a concept or solution out of ego or dogma or alternatively adopt a solution because it's got that sweet, sweet Kool-Aid taste." Too often, support for or dislike of things like matrices and registers is driven by these motivations, not logic or an understanding of the underlying principles.

There is never a single right or correct solution to how we should manage risk.

So, how can you keep an open mind?

The Utility Funnel – five tests

As a test of whether a risk management concept, process, methodology, artefact or approach (a risk management "thing") is going to be a likely net positive or negative contributor in a role it is proposed for, apply the Utility Funnel.

Each layer of the funnel asks simple questions:

Do you (the authors, designers or drivers) understand it?

- ✓ Do you understand the inherent strengths and weaknesses of the approach? If it has limitations, how will you communicate and overcome them? Can it produce misleading or manipulated outcomes?
- ✓ Do you really understand its original design intent and mandate? For example, if you state that the approach is required by "the Standard" is it really?

Is it fit-for-purpose and tailored?

- ✓ Is the method you are proposing fit-for-purpose for the organisation, it's operating context, appetite for risk, organisational maturity and capability, and risk exposures?
- ✓ Does it reflect the non-negotiable stakeholder, regulatory or other obligations you are beholden to?
- ✓ Is it right-scaled? Does it balance efficiency and ease of use with sufficient rigour and horsepower? How does it speak to the unique language and DNA of your environment?

Is it aligned with or embedded in business as usual?

- ✓ Does the approach align to the business, existing planning mechanisms or workflows, or does it reinforce risk as a stand-alone concern?
- ✓ Does it encourage people to think about objectives, resources and uncertainty/risk as a single peer-level trade-space? Or is risk an afterthought?

Do your people understand it?

- ✓ Will the people implementing the method or tool in practice do that well? Or will they use it to just demonstrate going through the motions and ticking the boxes? For example, the ease of use and apparent "science" in a matrix make it attractive to time-poor managers.
- ✓ What is the quality of the guidance or coaching you will provide? How will you ensure implementation doesn't become a copy-paste Cargo Cult?

Will it be living and used in practice?

- ✓ How is the thing going to be used to support decision making in practice? Yes, for real, at the speed of the business, not just once every six months or so.
- ✓ Will it be seen to add value or simply to achieve compliance?

What typically fails?

My lived experience is that in too many cases, the application-in-practice of matrices fails tests 1, 2 and 4. Too many risk registers (regardless of their form) fail tests 2, 3, 4 and 5. That's why I will continue to challenge them, not because I don't like them out of principle.

The bottom line

If you can convince me that a risk management concept, tool, method or philosophy passes through the Utility Funnel, then chances are it's going to add value to your organisation's ability to achieve objectives and manage its risks in a proactive and deliberate manner.

At the end of the day, that's what it's all about.

If you want to manage risk in your organisation through interpretive dance, and it passes the five tests – happy days. However, if what you are proposing fails the tests it's likely what I call "*Barnacle Risk Management*" – the accretion of ever more unhelpful mass on the bottom of the boat that does little but slow it down.

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