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**What project risk management
should learn from rock climbing**

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1   Introduction

Project/programme managers are leaders. They're out the front, driving forward, taking risks with accountability for getting their project or programme across the finishing line. But they need help, and for that the risk manager should be their invaluable no.2.

This article attempts to redefine the relationship between the project/programme manager or project lead and the risk manager and how risk based decision making in rock climbing equally applies to project/programme management.

To derive the value from risk management we need to rethink what it is there to do. By redefining the role of the risk manager as someone who is authoritative, creative, empathetic and a great communicator, you can begin to harness the skills needed to effectively achieve the outcomes.

2   Lessons from climbing

Most mere mortals like us look at big wall rock climbers in awe. They're bonkers right? In reality, they live and die by their ability to take calculated risks.

Sure, there are the rare few climbers who have the skill and confidence to tackle big walls solo – no ropes, no friends, high stakes (!); and so in the project world there are also the rare few project leads who can do everything themselves. But that's a high-risk model with high consequences for failure.

In most cases a good climber needs a rock-solid no.2 (belay) on the other end of the rope. No matter how good that lead climber is, mistakes can happen. Climbers talk about the need for a fundamental trust relationship between lead and support climber. The climber at the bottom literally has his/her partners' life in their hands.

Risk management isn't often life and death stuff, but the picture illustrates an important point – and it's one of trust and connectedness. The climbing lead is the project lead, driving from the front, finding the way. The risk manager is their eyes and ears, tethered to the lead but keeping a look out for issues that are going to threaten success. They look up, out, check the weather, etc. The lead needs to know the risk manager has got their back, and the risk manager needs to know that the lead (the project/programme manager) will listen when they give advice.

Despite this, it's amazing how often we hear project/programme teams complaining that they need to spend time on risk. It's time to ask "if they're not there to help you, then what is the point of risk management?"

Projects/programmes go wrong because of the failure to effectively manage risk, and don't forget it's the project/programme manager who is accountable when it goes wrong, not the risk manager.

Think about how connected your project/programme managers and risk managers really are, or do you have a project/programme manager that is trying to climb solo?

3 Introducing risk based decision making

If we anchor this analogy back in the real world, what we're talking about is risk based decision making.

It's natural when configuring your project to think in 'hub-and-spoke' terms, whereby the hub is the project/programme management team and the spokes are each of the 'support functions'. Risk tends to sit as a support function alongside cost management/finance, stakeholder management, commercial/procurement, resourcing/HR etc.

Now I'm sure that anyone from those functions would claim they're the most important and need to be in the middle, but I don't necessarily agree. Risk management is different and to be effective it needs to be right in the heart of the management conversation - asking questions, sharing ideas, scanning the horizon, and working as wing-person to the project/programme lead. If you can get to this point, then the project/programme starts to become able to use risk to support/justify the decisions that need to be made.

Risk based decision making is achieved when the project/programme looks to risk to provide insight, and uses this to shape how it responds and makes decisions. It sounds obvious, risk 101 type behaviour, but it's also incredibly rare to see.

Part of the challenge here is the growth of risk as a distinct discipline. It's great that we've got smart people with funky tools, but sometimes this 'cleverness' is at the expense of really solid management skills that can identify issues, engage with leaders, and shape and drive mitigation that has real impact.

To bring risk management back into the core, risk management should be creative, be allowed to challenge, and be hard-wired into the leadership team. But that's not easy.

My tips for getting to a risk based decision structure are:

- **Find the right person** – many risk professionals have become adept at the maths and the modelling, but often have minimal experience in helping to sniff out issues, engage with the exec, and drive action. Recognise the value of both skill sets, and build capability accordingly.
- **Don't just look to the project/programme manager** – you obviously can't divorce their role from one of managing risk, but on larger or complex initiatives it's unwise to think that the team tasked with 'making stuff happen', also has enough bandwidth and the skills to take the long view and plan for the 'what might happen'. In most cases, the project/programme manager needs support.
- **Engage top down** – for all the reasons above, lots of risk people feel they're not allowed to engage and drive. Project/programme leaders can be a bit scared of risk as it might make them look bad. But put these fears aside, seek input and listen hard.

In conclusion, we encourage you to reflect on your own risk management arrangements and test how strong the link really is between your risk register and the decisions the leadership team make on a daily basis.

About Ed Brown

Ed is a Director of Aspire Europe, a market leading P3 performance improvement consultancy.

Before joining Aspire Europe, Ed worked for AECOM and Hill International and spent a diverse, global career in the building and infrastructure sector which helped him both deliver and review a vast array of projects.

Ed has developed an enthusiasm for risk management, helping a number of major delivery organisations rethink how they use this discipline to be more successful in what they do.