



Imaginary Risks

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david@risk-doctor.com

Some say that risk identification is the most important phase of the risk management process, since it is impossible to manage a risk unless it has first been identified. As a result, many risk identification techniques have been developed, including brainstorms, interviews, questionnaires, checklists and prompt lists, assumptions/constraints analysis, SWOT analysis, Delphi groups, nominal group technique, root cause analysis, failure modes analysis and others. Some of these methods are creative and others draw on past experience; some can be undertaken by individuals while others require group input; some approaches are simple and rapid where others are labour-intensive and take time.

Whichever risk identification technique is used however, they all require one factor to make them effective. This powerful characteristic is possessed by all but forgotten by most. Every person is born with it, and some people work to develop theirs into a mature capability while it remains dormant in others. This risk identification tool exists in the human head, and is called the *imagination*.

All risk identification techniques require people to imagine potential future conditions which do not currently exist. The success of risk identification depends on people's ability to envisage imaginary circumstances and possible futures. Without imagination, risk identification is limited to what has happened before, and specific new risks which challenge the current situation cannot be foreseen.

A range of techniques are available to stimulate the imagination, including visualisation, scenario painting, rich pictures, appreciative enquiry, story-telling and other creativity approaches. Risk practitioners should consider using these to develop their own ability to imagine possible risks, as well as to help their colleagues during the risk identification process.

One simple and fun way to encourage the imagination is the use of "*fantasy questions*" to expose risks in a non-threatening way. These can be employed during risk identification interviews, though they might also be used with other techniques. You can ask yourself, or you can question others. Example fantasy questions might include :

- "If you were dreaming about your project and it turned into a nightmare, what would be happening?" (this question encourages people to talk about perceived threats)
- "I am your fairy godmother and you have three wishes to use on your project – what will you do first?" (this might result in identification of new opportunities)
- "If an alien joined your project team, what would they find most unusual?" (this aims to expose blind spots)

These examples are light-hearted and may not be appropriate for all situations or organisations, but the principle can be applied in a more serious way. Questions can be asked during risk identification interviews which stretch the imagination and encourage the interviewee to consider options beyond their normal experience. For example : "If you were a new employee and this was your first project, what questions would you ask?" "How might this project be different if it took place in a foreign country?" "When your client lies awake at night, what is he worrying about?" "What are your supplier's best hopes for this project?"

Questions like these (and other creativity approaches) use the imagination to take us beyond the present and the familiar, opening doors to new possibilities. In a sense all risks are imaginary since they do not yet exist, and imagination-based techniques can be powerful aids to risk identification. If you can imagine something, it could happen. Set your imagination free and see what risks emerge!