



Technology Risk

The Sentence Everyone Nodded At

Why the story disappears as risk travels upward



They Read the Risk. Doctour Karinne placed the risk report on the table. She handled written things carefully. Words had consequences.

“This,” she said, tapping the page lightly, “is what the board will see.”

Pore Amyas leaned forward.

“Let’s hear it.”

Karinne adjusted her glasses and read aloud.

“Dependence on emerging technology may impact operational delivery.”

There was a pause. Dame Anwen nodded slowly.

“Yes,” she said. “That could cause problems.”

“Integration risk,” said Pore Amyas.

“Supplier maturity,” said Karinne.

“Programme delay,” said Anwen.

Three experienced professionals. Three slightly different worries. But the same conclusion. Trouble. Pore Amyas looked at the page again.

“That’s the whole description?” Karinne nodded. “For the report.” Dame Anwen tapped the sentence thoughtfully.

“Then we should understand it properly,” she said. “Because somewhere behind that sentence...”

“...there will be a story.”

The Engineer

Later that afternoon, they found him. Pore Amyas read the sentence again.

“Dependence on emerging technology may impact operational delivery.”
“What does it mean?” she asked. The engineer looked slightly puzzled.
“Oh,” he said. “It means the system doesn’t exist yet.” The room grew quiet.
“That,” said Dame Anwen gently, “is not quite the risk we imagined.” The engineer hesitated.
“It might fail,” he said. “Or it might remove half the current process. Pore Amyas leaned back.
“So the uncertainty,” she said slowly, “is whether this becomes a problem...”
“...or a breakthrough,” finished Dame Anwen. Doctour Karinne made a note.
“We all understood the sentence immediately,” Pore Amyas said. Dame Anwen gave a faint smile.
“Yes,” she replied. “And we all understood something different.”
She paused.
“The strange thing about language,” she said quietly, “is that the clearer a sentence appears, the easier it is to forget that everyone may be imagining something different.”

The Curious Authority of Written Words

Something interesting happens when uncertainty is written down. The sentence begins to look authoritative. The wording appears deliberate. The phrasing seems complete. The meaning appears settled.

But written language is a remarkably poor transport mechanism for intent. Two people can read the same sentence and imagine completely different futures. Which is precisely what had just happened.

Risk descriptions are rarely precise definitions. More often, they are compressed concerns: brief explanations of something someone has noticed. A sentence written quickly before a meeting.

Yet organisations often treat those sentences as if they are fully understood. People read the words. They recognise familiar phrases. And their minds quietly fill in the rest.

When the Risk Travels

The sentence rarely stays where it began.

In the risk plan, it usually sits alongside context.

- Background.
- Assumptions.
- Possible consequences.
- Early thinking about response.

The person closest to the work understands this.

But as the risk moves up through the organisation, something subtle happens. The explanation shrinks. The context disappears.

What reaches leadership is often just the sentence. Sometimes a score. Occasionally, a colour.

The uncertainty remains the same. But the meaning has been compressed. And when things get compressed, interpretation begins.

The risk plan contains the story. The report contains the headline. And decisions are often made based on the headline.

The Illusion of Shared Meaning

Language is remarkably efficient at suggesting meaning. It is far less reliable at guaranteeing shared understanding. Consider the sentence:
“Supplier instability may affect programme delivery.”

What does it mean?

- financial instability
- delayed production quality failures contractual disputes capability gaps

Each interpretation could be reasonable. But only one reflects the concern the risk owner originally had. And that distinction matters when decisions follow.

The Comfortable Assumption

There is a reason this misunderstanding persists. Most people do not pause to check what a risk description means. They assume they understand it. That assumption feels efficient. After all, asking the author to explain the sentence takes time.

Interpreting it yourself takes seconds. But speed and understanding are not the same thing.

As Dame Anwen once observed:

“When people say they understand the risk immediately, they usually mean they have recognised the words.”

Recognition is not understanding. It is familiarity wearing confidence.

Risk Is Not Just Trouble

Another misunderstanding quietly shapes how these sentences are read. The word 'risk' is often treated as shorthand for 'problem'.

But risk is uncertainty. Uncertainty can produce loss. It can also produce advantage.

The same uncertainty that threatens delivery can also lead to transformation. A new technology might fail. Or it might cut the current process in half. The sentence in the risk plan rarely makes that distinction clear. And when the meaning behind the sentence is misunderstood, organisations can end up managing the wrong thing entirely.

- Mitigating opportunities.
- Pursuing threats.

Or missing both.

The Nodding Room

Doctour Karinne once observed something curious. “The most dangerous moment,” she said, “is when everyone nods.” Not because agreement is bad. But because nodding often means people recognise the words and think they understand the meaning.

The room appears aligned. The interpretation is not.

A Simpler Question

Dame Anwen preferred a simpler approach.

Whenever a new risk appeared in the risk plan, she asked one question. Not about probability. Not about scoring. Not about colours on a heat map.

Just this:

“What would actually happen?”

That question moves the conversation away from wording and toward consequences. ***And consequences are what decisions must ultimately address.***

The Wyrd Observation

Pore Amyas once described risk descriptions this way.

“They’re not explanations,” she said. “They’re clues.”

They are clues that something, somewhere, deserves attention. But clues only make sense when you speak to the person who noticed them.

Conclusion

The sentence is not the risk. Risk plans are useful.

- They record concerns.
- They preserve memory.
- They structure discussion.

But the sentence in the report is not the risk. It is simply a summary of something someone noticed. To understand the risk, you need something older than documentation.

Curiosity. The willingness to ask: “What did you mean?”

Because the greatest misunderstanding in risk management is rarely about probability or impact. It is about meaning.

Two people can read the same sentence and imagine entirely different consequences. And as that sentence moves up through reports and summaries, the gap between those interpretations often gets wider.

If this feels familiar, it may be because many organisations have experienced the same moment. A meeting where everyone agreed with the risk description. And only later realised they had been imagining entirely different risks.

Dame Anwen closed the document.

“So,” she said quietly. “Now that we understand the words...”

“...shall we discuss the risk?”