

Maturity – good or bad ?

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Today's society is debating the value of age. The demographic time bomb can't be defused, and coping with our increasingly aging population will demand changes in many aspects of society. In what some call 'yoof culcha', experience is not valued, older people are seen as irrelevant and unproductive, and the ideal human state is to be young, strong and beautiful. This thinking has even permeated the business world, where traditional ways of working are regarded as outdated, and everything needs to be the latest version. The rise of change management as a driving discipline is perhaps a symptom of this approach.

In parallel with these developments, we have seen a contrasting focus on maturity in many parts of corporate life. The Irish poet John Finlay defined maturity as 'the capacity to endure uncertainty', and as we face increasing uncertainty all around us, more and more organisations aspire to maturity in a range of areas of competence, including risk management.

There has been a rapid growth in so-called 'maturity models' which claim to measure degrees of capability in various disciplines, aiming to help organisations become 'more mature'. The Association for Project Management (APM) has recently completed a survey of maturity models in the project management space, and found many competing offerings. For example, the Project Management Institute (PMI) has developed its own Organizational Project Management Maturity Model (OPM3) in response to a perceived demand from businesses who need to understand their existing capability and improve it in a structured way. The UK Office for Government Commerce has both the Portfolio, Programme and Project Management Maturity Model (P3M3) and the PRINCE2 Maturity Model (P2MM). And the International Project Management Association (IPMA) has their Project Excellence Model, based on the generic EFQM approach.

Even in the specialised area of risk management, several specific maturity models exist, some of which have a considerable track record of use in many industries and organisations across the world. The better risk management maturity models take a broad view across the many factors required for competence in

managing risk, for example, addressing the risk culture of an organisation, as well as its risk processes, its risk infrastructure, and the risk knowledge and skills of its people.

Clearly people see maturity as desirable, a goal to which every organisation should aspire. But is it always a good thing? Is it possible to be too mature? The word 'mature' is used in at least two ways. One meaning is about being fully developed, ripe, at the peak of perfection, having reached the maximum level of development. But the word is also used to mean no longer young, with implications of being old and past it. Brigitte Bardot recognised this dual meaning when she reportedly said recently: 'I have not grown old, I have ripened'.

So what is 'risk management maturity'? Does it mean that the approach to risk management in a particular organisation has developed as far as it can, no further improvement is possible, and everything is as good as it's going to get? Or does it imply a degree of inflexibility, being set in one's ways, in a rut, and doing things because 'we've always done it that way'? Neither of these seems to be attractive options or worthwhile goals.

Perhaps it is possible to be 'too mature'? Some older people seem to think they are so mature that they never need or expect to learn anything new, while others recognise the falsehood in the statement that 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks'. The same is true of organisations, with some believing that they are at the top of their game and just need to keep doing what they are doing, perhaps with incremental improvements, and others constantly seeking to innovate and reinvent themselves to meet the challenges and opportunities of the moment – the so-called 'Madonna approach'. Maybe a perception of 'being mature' might discourage people or organisations from wanting change, if they don't see the need. In that sense, maturity could be a dangerous thing.

So what is the answer? One answer might be to proactively reduce one's level of maturity, to 'de-mature'. This might involve challenging the accepted way of doing things, seeking to cut out aspects of risk management process and practice that have grown up over time but which are no longer necessary. We can learn from the 'lean' and 'Agile' movements here,

identifying and removing redundancy and waste, and seeking to maximise efficiency while retaining full effectiveness. 'Lean risk management' may be the way of the future.

An alternative answer, which can be implemented more immediately, is to ensure that our approach to risk management is constantly refreshed and renewed. This might involve adopting new techniques, keeping up to date with the latest thinking and developments, learning from leading practitioners in our own and other industries, offering refresher skills training to our staff etc.

We all need to beware of complacency, especially in risk management. In our ever-changing world, what worked yesterday may not be good enough for today or tomorrow. When considering whether to ripen like Bardot or adapt like Madonna, we should remember that age is no guarantee of maturity!

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About the author

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