



Better safe than sorry?

By David Hillson

Whenever we face a risk, one of the biggest challenges is deciding what to do about it, if anything. This is not a simple matter. A wide range of influences affects how we respond to a risk. There are physiological factors relating to the 'flight, fright or freeze' reaction. There are subconscious sources of bias arising from previous experience and internal frames of reference. And, of course, there are various measurable criteria that we can use to make a rational assessment of the situation.

One factor that is not often considered is the role of cultural norms of behaviour. These are often embodied in the popular sayings and proverbs that we all learn from our childhood. And, while they often capture a great deal of learned wisdom and experience, some of these proverbs are misleading and can result in an inappropriate response. In the context of managing risk, one of the most unhelpful sayings is the assurance that 'What you don't know can't hurt you'. Many project teams and businessmen known only too well that this is far from the truth, and the archetypal 'Black Swan' events (popularised by Taleb in his book of the same name) prove that unforeseen events can have a devastating impact when they happen.

Another proverb defines a common approach to managing risk that has shaped public and professional attitudes to risk in many ways. We've all heard the saying 'It's better to be safe than sorry'. This sentiment has a more formal manifestation in a concept that affects a wide range of areas, including government policy, health and safety legislation, environmental standards, business regulatory frameworks, child protection practice, and even parenting guidelines. 'Better safe than sorry' is also known as the 'precautionary principle'.

The precautionary principle states that, where there is a threat of severe or irreversible harm, and if there is no proof that harm would not result, it is better to take protective action. Decisions are then made to protect the public or the environment from the severe harm that might occur.

Examples include reactions to the supposed but unproven 'dangers' of genetically modified food, mobile phones or nanotechnology. We also hear tales of local authorities banning Christmas lights or hanging baskets 'just in case' they fall on someone, or requiring schoolchildren to wear protective goggles when playing conkers.

The problem with the precautionary principle is that it leads to an over-protective approach, wasting too much time and effort on things that might not ever be a problem. It can also lead to the discipline of risk management into disrepute. When one of my friends learned I was a risk specialist, she got very cross about 'silly rules at work' imposed by the 'risk police' that mean she can't leave her handbag under her desk 'just in case' someone trips on it.

The precautionary principle arises from a focus on one of the two main dimensions of risk to the detriment of another. It comes from concentrating on impact (what would happen if the risk occurred) but ignoring probability (how likely the risk is to occur at all). This is partly because the impact of a risk is easy to estimate or describe, whereas probability is a hard concept, especially where we have no relevant previous experience of this or a similar risk. We also discount probability because people generally are afraid of statistics. And finally there is the 'public wisdom' embodied in the proverb whereby we all know it is 'Better to be safe than sorry'.

How does the precautionary principle relate to the worlds of projects? We constantly encounter risks in all our projects, and many of these are novel with no previous history or track record to guide us in how to respond. As in public life, the temptation is for project teams to exercise caution, preferring safety 'just in case', leading to an unnecessary overreaction to risks and a waste of valuable time and resources that could be better used elsewhere. Then when nothing happens and the risks that we all worried about never materialise, people say that risk management is just a lot of fuss about nothing.

In terms of public policy, the value of the precautionary principle is being challenged. A House of Lords enquiry even recommended that it should be dropped as an unhelpful influence, even though European law requires governments to take it into account when forming policy.

On our projects, too, we should question whether 'better safe than sorry' is the right approach. A few simple steps can help us to counter the tendency to be overprotective. For example, we should ensure that our risk process includes a realistic assessment of how likely a risk is to occur, as well as an estimate of its possible effect.

We need to recognise that the worst-case level of impact almost never happens, and perhaps it would be better to develop responses which target the most likely impact. We must remember that some risks are good for us, and positive opportunities should be identified and pursued.

We need to get used to ideas of 'risk efficiency', balancing risk and reward, and accept that it is appropriate and necessary to take some risks.

And, finally, we must improve our risk communication, being clear about exactly what risks we face, how likely they are to happen, what levels of impact could realistically result, and what responses are appropriate.

'Better safe than sorry' sounds like a good attitude to adopt, in life as well as on our projects. But it is possible to be too safe, being overprotective and cautious, preventing ourselves from taking the risks that are associated with progress, innovation and success. Let's banish the precautionary principle from our projects, and use the risk process to ensure that we have no reason to be sorry.

About the author

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