

On the Subject of Risk Metalanguage¹

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

23 March 2025

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Dear Editor,

I read with interest Rasoul Abdolmohammadi's ideas about introducing a new risk metalanguage. As with most papers on this subject, there were some ideas that I agreed with and parts of the argument that I felt were missing. Over the years, writing guidance on the important matter of how risks can be understood and articulated has proven difficult to pin down. I have written about this subject in the past, and I am sure that there have been readers have failed to agree with all of my ideas too!

David Hillson's original contribution to the principles of risk metalanguage has proved to be influential. I chaired the group that authored the APM's Guide *Prioritising Project Risks* (2008). David was one of the guide's four co-editors. As a group, we thought that, before risks were prioritised, they should be understood and articulated clearly. For this reason, the guide includes a chapter titled *Understanding and Describing Risks*. The chapter starts with the simple cause-risk-effect approach that David had first identified in connection with his metalanguage, explained using Figure 1 below.

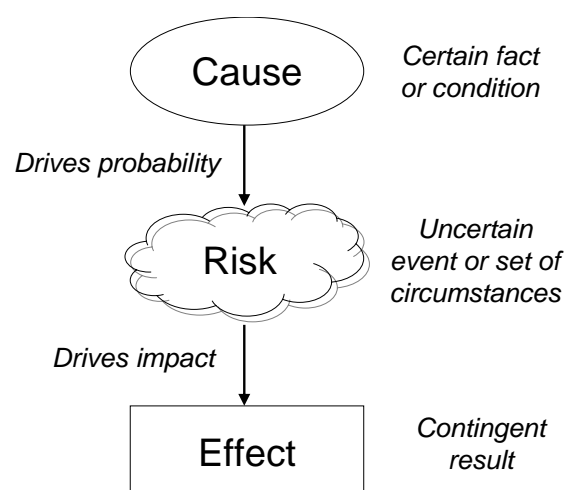


Figure 1 Simple cause-risk-effect model

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An important point to note from this figure is that the word *cause* refers to a fact or condition that is certain. Our group concluded that any risk description should be grounded in a context that is already known. Without this, the risk description becomes rootless. Another way of explaining the word *cause* in this sense is to describe it as capturing relevant project-specific facts.

I can illustrate the importance of capturing relevant facts by using the simplest of Rasoul's examples: *"Due to weather conditions, rain may occur, which could result in delay at construction works."*

In this example the risk's cause is captured as "Due to weather conditions...". However, as Rasoul correctly notes, this doesn't add value. It is just a statement of the obvious. Moreover, the project team has no control over the weather. On this basis, Rasoul suggests that the stated cause can be discarded to produce: *"Due to the possibility of rain, there may be delays in construction works."*

And this is where I think something has been missed from the argument. My view is that the problem with the first risk description is that it contains no project-specific facts. So what might these be? My recommendation is that it always worth considering the project plan, associated assumptions, contract conditions, or the implications of decisions that have been made. Thus, for example our weather-related risk might be worded: *"The plan includes no allowance for construction working days lost to bad weather. Thus, due to the possibility of rain, there may be delays in construction works."*

The underlying cause of the risk can now be understood to be rooted in a fact about the project plan. This understanding is needed in order to assess the risk and identify options for managing it. We can see this if we consider alternative causes/statements of fact.

- *"The plan includes ten days contingency for interruptions due to bad weather."*
- *"The construction period is planned to continue through the monsoon season."*
- *"Poor natural land drainage would create adverse ground conditions for construction vehicles if rainfall is higher than the seasonal average."*

Each of these conditions changes our understanding of the rainfall risk. Knowing which applies is important because it affects the risk estimates and risk mitigation options. The lesson I have learned from worked examples like these is that one should always start a risk description with project-specific facts that explain its context.

On another matter raised by Rasoul, I am in agreement. He suggests that risk can be described in more complex chains in which uncertainty can contribute in more than one place. This breaks away from the constraints of the simple structure shown by Figure 1, which, in some cases, might prove to be too simple. Many of the members of my Risk Prioritisation Guide group were of a similar mind. One of the results was the inclusion of an example of a more complex risk structure our *Understanding and Describing Risks* chapter as shown in Figure 2 below.

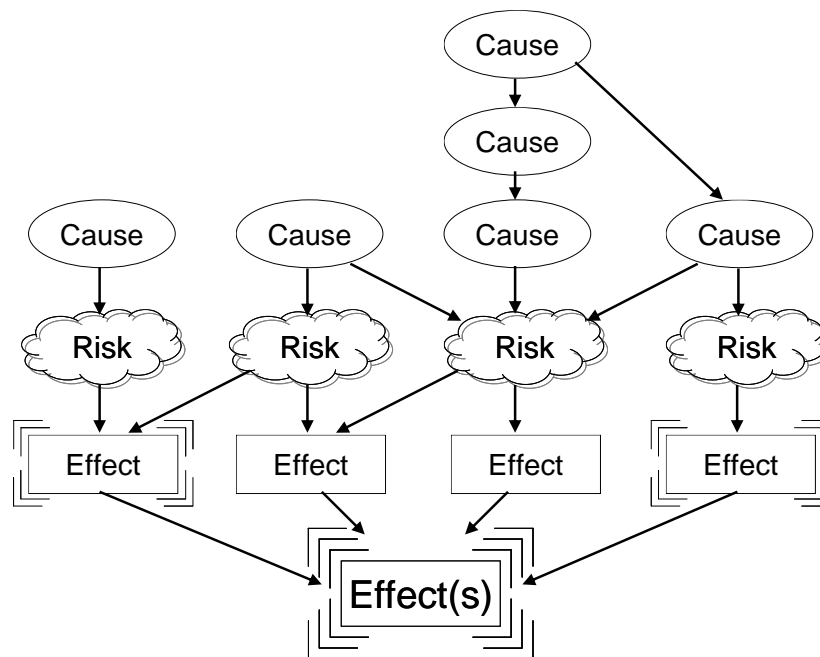


Figure 2: Causal map showing causes-risks-effects multiple relationships

Figure 2 shows how risks might be described at a higher level of decomposition to those that can be captured by the simplest possible approach. In the guide, we referred to these as being composite risks. To take Rasul's example, this type of causal map might be used to describe the overall risk to construction delay, rather than just that of rain. When we take this approach, we might see that those elements marked as Risks can be treated as being sources of uncertainty that potentially share common effects, and that the effects themselves can combine to produce significant variability of outcome. Insights from approaches like this have the potential to provide a much richer picture than the traditional approach of treating risks as being separate discrete events to be listed in a risk register and managed on a case-by-case basis.

Yours sincerely,

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