

Risk Culture in Financial Organisations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Michael Power | Simon Ashby | Tommaso Palermo





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Introduction

Interest in the cultures of organisations and their effects on management practices goes back many years and there is an extensive body of scholarship on this topic. Yet this interest has increased dramatically in the period since 2008. The debate is led by the world of practice, particularly in the financial services sector. Furthermore, a new twist in the vocabulary of culture has taken place and companies, advisors and regulators now seem to have a specific focus on something called risk culture.

What is this new object that features so prominently in discussion about financial regulation, at many industry events and on numerous blogs? Is it a single thing or does it have many faces? How do companies understand and operationalise it? Do they do this in similar ways? How do financial regulators influence conceptions of risk culture? Is the demand to improve risk culture at all coherent? Can it – whatever it is – be consciously managed? Is it auditable? Is there a single desirable risk culture or are there diverse and plural approaches? If so, are there any limits to this diversity?

In this report we provide some answers to these questions based on our investigations over a period of 18 months. Our research into a constantly developing field is however necessarily incomplete and raises as many questions as it answers. We are also conscious that the debate about culture and risk culture is a very crowded one, with regulators, advisors and trade bodies seeking to provide thought leadership. We therefore offer this report as another contribution to the extensive public debate about the future of financial services.

There have been many efforts to define risk culture and this multiplicity tells us something, namely that it is conceptually rather fuzzy. We decided to go out and listen to the way that different organisations – banks, insurers and their advisors – think about and operationalise risk culture change programmes. We think that this is where the action is – where risk culture becomes, or does not become, an organisational reality. Our report paints a rich picture and we have attempted to provide some intellectual structure to the diversity we have observed. To aid the readability of this report we have shifted a large body of material on methods and other matters to a series of appendices.

Our research positions risk culture as the outcome of a series of trade-offs across a number of dimensions. How our participating organisations approach and think about these trades-offs also suggests an interesting difference between what we call organic and engineered styles of intervening in risk culture. We make no judgement about whether one style is superior to another but we note a paradox: while many individuals will openly support the former, it is the latter which is more visible. We explore the reasons for this.

One of the big unanswered questions in our study is the extent to which individual organisational efforts in the space of risk culture are in fact overshadowed by a trans-organisational regulatory culture with some interesting properties. We make some speculations in this regard but the topic warrants further work.

We hope that this report will be of interest and use to banks, insurers and other financial organisations; to regulators – both policy makers and supervisors; and to advisors. Rather than make a series of explicit recommendations, we have outlined a number of challenges and questions for senior risk personnel and CEOs, which arise naturally from our research findings.



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It is widely agreed that failures of culture, which permitted excessive and uncontrolled risk-taking and a loss of focus on end clients, were at the heart of the financial crisis. Many official reports, analyses, commentaries and blogs go further to focus on the cultural dimensions of risk-taking and control in financial organisations, arguing that, for all the many formal frameworks and technical modelling expertise of modern financial risk management, risk-taking behaviour and an absence of ethics were poorly understood both by companies and regulators.

From this point of view, we regard the explosion of interest in risk culture in financial organisations since 2008 as being symptomatic of a desire to reconnect risk-taking and related management and governance processes to a new moral narrative of organisational purpose.

The primary aim of our research extending over 18 months and involving several banks and insurers in the United Kingdom, was to discover and analyse how the risk culture change agenda was taking shape inside different organisations. From this grounded and bottom-up point of view we decided not to define risk culture in advance but to observe and understand its manifestations within organisations. We interacted mainly, though not exclusively with personnel from the risk function. Whilst this may be seen as limiting the generalizability of our results, it was clear to us at an early stage that risk culture change programmes were being led by risk functions and that the reshaping of the organisational footprint of risk management was at the centre of these programmes. We supplemented this approach with a formal survey of CII and CIMA members and also engaged, for comparative purposes, with personnel from two non-financial companies – an airline and a large industrial company.

Our desk research of academic and practitioner literature on risk management, management control, culture and safety issues suggested strongly that risk culture is a way of framing issues of risk and culture in organisations and not a separate object. In addition, risk culture is itself a composite of a number of interrelated factors involving many trade-offs. We approached the research with a number of additional prior assumptions:

- Risk culture is not a static thing but a continuous process, or processes, which repeats and renews itself, but may be subject to shocks
- Risk culture will be a mixture of formal and informal processes. The former are easy to observe. The latter are harder to observe since they involve a myriad of small behaviours and habits which in the aggregate constitute the state of risk culture at any one point in time
- We do not assume that an organisation necessarily has a single risk culture and we accept that risk cultures may be trans-organisational. Conceptually we would prefer to speak of 'risk cultures' which may be unevenly distributed within organisations (e.g. in retail as compared with investment banking) or across the financial industry as a whole (e.g. insurers as compared with banks)

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The most fundamental issue at stake in the risk culture debate is an organisation's self-awareness of its balance between risk-taking and control. It is clear that many organisational actors prior to the financial crisis were either unaware of, or indifferent to, the actual trade-off or risk profile of the organisation as a whole. A combination of control functions being ignored or fragmented and of revenue-generating functions being given star status rendered the actual trade-offs involved in this balance institutionally invisible, both internally and externally, until disaster struck.

For this reason, the prescriptions arising from our research essentially point towards recovering the organisational capability to make visible, to understand, and to accept or change the actual control-risk trade-off. Many practitioners now articulate this in terms of organisational clarity about the nature and enforcement of risk appetite and we observe that this plays a large part in many risk culture reform agendas.

Our research reveals that, underlying this fundamental question of balance, our participant organisations were also grappling with several other significant trade-offs as they sought to address risk culture. Unlike a number of consulting frameworks, we do not regard one side of these trade-offs as necessarily 'healthier' than another. Rather they provide a conceptual framework, arising out of our data, which allows us to describe the variety of approaches by our participant organisations.

These trade-offs also provide a way of framing some of the challenges that CROs, CEOs and Boards need to consider.

The swing back to the centralisation of risk management

Our research suggests that the risk culture debate is symptomatic of a desire to make risk and risk management a more prominent feature of organisational decision-making and governance. The pendulum has swung towards an increase in the centralisation of risk management within financial organisations. This is understandable given the events of 2007-9. We observe three interrelated dimensions of this shift.

- Greater structural formalisation of a 'Three Lines of Defence' (TLD) model
- The creation of new risk oversight units and capabilities
- Increased attention to risk information consolidation and aggregation

Underlying this general change in the regulatory and organisational climate are a number of specific trade-offs which define and are fundamental to the way organisations think about and seek to act upon their risk cultures. We have documented the variety of ways in which organisations have consciously and unconsciously addressed these six trade-offs, often mixing approaches. We outline some key challenges for CROs, CEOs and Boards arising from these trade-offs.

Business partner or independent advisor?

The authority of the risk function is a core attribute of risk culture. We observed two approaches to increasing the footprint of risk within organisations. Partnership builders sought to engage directly with the business, seeking to position themselves as trusted advisors. Partnering overseers looked to influence the business via risk training programmes and general awareness-raising activities. The former approach involves acting on the capabilities of the risk function and in developing greater business fluency and credibility. The latter involves acting on the capabilities of the business itself. Both approaches, which are often mixed together, confront 'Three Lines of Defence' (TLD) frameworks which value and promote the independence of the second line risk function. Managing this trade-off between business partnering and structural independence is one among several key challenges.

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Risk culture challenges for CROs, CEOs and Boards

- How would you monitor changes in the internal authority of the risk function? If you don't want to do this, why not?
- Is the current balance between informal relationship building and formal training of the business in risk understood and consciously chosen? Does the risk function have a role in the design and implementation of risk training programmes?
- Are you recruiting and training risk managers in the different languages of the business or is there still an underlying mono-culture within the risk function? In the latter case, have you ever discussed your perception of such culture with colleagues in the risk function?
- Do you generate stories of risk management success and value creation and ensure that they circulate within the organisation and with regulators? Considering the last year, how many of these success stories can you recall?

Informal network building or formal processes?

Regular interaction and 'touch points' between risk functions and the business are widely agreed to be important and not only in financial services. We observed interaction enthusiasts and realists. The former are wary of formal tools on their own, and invest time and resource in building informal internal networks. Realists suggest that too much interaction can inhibit decision-making. They also support the role of technology in mediating interaction - as did our comparator airline. Realists have more respect for TLD models than enthusiasts who continually work across first and second lines. Despite accepting its salience, none of our participant organisations tried to measure risk-business interaction and there seemed to be little ambition to do so.

Risk culture challenges for CROs, CEOs and Boards

- Can you name one or two individuals doing risk culture relevant work in your organisation? If yes, where are they (e.g. risk, audit, business)? How often have you talked to them? Do you feel you give them enough support?
- Would you be interested to know whether and how interaction between your risk function and the business is changing? If so, how could you find this out?
- Do you track how many times business functions approach Risk for advice and partnering? If not, why not?
- If you have implemented a TLD approach in your organisation, do you think this has made interaction between the business and Risk more or less likely?
- Are you worried about a lack of interaction between Risk and the business? If yes, why? Can you think of concrete examples of situations where more interaction would have helped to address business problems? Or examples where too much interaction has slowed decision-making?
- Do you consciously translate risk appetite issues into a language which business units can understand and own?

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Between risk and control?

We observed that the clarity and enforcement of trading limits was regarded as a core feature of risk culture across all our participant organisations. However, we detected subtle differences in approach and attitude to limits. ‘Sandbox guardians’ (a phrase we heard during our research) position limits as a means to an end and have a business decision facing approach to the enforcement of limits. In contrast, for what we call ‘gold-platers’ (another term we heard used frequently), limits and related risk management policies and rules unintentionally become a system in their own right. Specific organisational inclinations one way or another were strongly influenced by their own histories and collective memories of bad practice. From the comparator airline it also became apparent that the propensity to invest in knowledge of risk is a risk appetite and risk culture issue.

Risk culture challenges for CROs, CEOs and Boards

- How do you get assurance that the risk function is focused primarily on supporting business decisions?
- Do you know which areas of the business are ‘gold-plated’ in terms of risk management and control? If not, how will you find this out and what will you do about it?
- When risk limits and tolerances are changed, is the risk function a leader or a follower in this decision?
- Do you understand the appetite for acquiring risk knowledge in your organisation?
- Have you ever discussed internally the implications for risk-taking and/or for your desired level of risk appetite in acquisition strategies, particularly if you plan to buy entire teams from other organisations?

Internal change or the use of advisors?

Under pressure to engage in some kind of risk culture change programme, many organisations have had to make decisions about whether to use advisors or not. We discerned a difference between consulting sceptics and enthusiasts. Sceptics had a mixed set of attitudes: a recognition that change processes must be owned internally to be effective over time, scepticism about formal survey instruments in the market; and a feeling that advisors were primarily selling regulatory compliance. Enthusiasts were also mixed: some were driven by regulation, while others sought leverage to develop new performance management systems with a risk component. Advisors themselves found risk culture a problematic consulting object. They were generally dissatisfied with existing approaches and recognised the need for a mix of skills. They were also searching for new ways to advise on decision-making processes.

Risk culture challenges for CROs, CEOs and Boards

- Does your organisation essentially have respect for advisors? Are you open to advisory propositions? How often have you been contacted by advisors in relation to risk culture in the last three months? How often have you found their proposals novel or of any interest?
- Do you have processes to discuss the kind of expertise you may need, internally and externally, to progress risk culture change? Do you have an appetite for benchmarking with external entities? If yes, what have you done about it?
- Have you ever approached the topic of risk culture in meetings attended by people from both HR and Risk? If you are a member of Risk, do you have access to raw data from internal staff morale surveys or customer satisfaction surveys?
- Is your organisation open to exchanges with research organisations like universities? If not, are you sure of the reasons why? If so, when was the last time there was such an exchange?

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Own risk culture or regulatory culture?

Regulation has undoubtedly been a big driver of risk culture change programmes. Risk culture features in many regulatory speeches. We found that attitudes to regulation were mixed. Frustrated organisations talked about excessive documentary demands, how regulation was interfering with business decisions and how it was crowding out attention to the softer dimensions of risk culture. Co-operatively disposed organisations accepted the new regulatory climate and sought to work with this more actively. A key issue is whether financial organisations understand the extent of the regulatory footprint on their business. The trade-off between their own approach to risk culture and that of the regulator is not even visible to many organisations. It also became apparent to us that there is a regulatory sub-culture in the sense of a network spanning parts of regulators, parts of financial organisations and parts of advisors who share common values. More research into the characteristics of this network is needed.

Risk culture challenges for CROs, CEOs and Boards

- Does your organisation genuinely respect the public objectives of the regulatory function? Do you have positive 'regulation conversations' internally? How often? Who is participating in such conversation (e.g. business, risk, compliance; senior or junior members of staff)?
- Do you push back and challenge the regulator? If not, do you know why not?
- If you think regulatory demands for documentary evidence are excessive, do you have a clear conception of what you would require in the absence of regulation?
- Do you have ways of tracking the extent to which regulation is 'inside' your organisation? Do you have any processes to track the impact of regulation on work habits and internal attitudes to risk? Would you like to know?
- Do you know how compliance experts are regarded in your organisation? If so, do you want to change that? If not, do you want to know?

Levers on behaviour: ethics or incentives?

Behaviour modification is another key issue for risk culture change programmes. We noted two generically different approaches to behavioural risk. The first we call ethics or mission-based. It involves renewed corporate narratives for focusing on clients along with respect for internal control processes. Interestingly, risk management is being re-positioned as a carrier of organisational ethics. In contrast, organisations also invest in disciplinary and incentives-based levers with greater short term purchase over behaviour in the form of risk metrics within the performance management system.

Risk culture challenges for CROs, CEOs and Boards

- Do you understand where in the organisation behavioural change is most necessary? If not, how will you get it?
- Which combination of levers is most likely to be effective in bringing about that change? Is such a combination different in different parts of the organisation (e.g. functional areas or hierarchical levels)?
- How are you monitoring and measuring 'respect' for internal control and risk management?

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Conclusions

Despite the apparent cynicism of the general public, our research demonstrates that financial services firms are engaged in extensive programmes of internal reform with a view to changing their culture of risk-taking and control.

The different trade-offs which emerge from our data are not mutually exclusive. Issues about the authority of risk expertise, the extent of interaction between risk and the business, the clarity of risk appetite, the use of advisors, the commitment to ethical change and whether regulation casts a more significant shadow over risk culture than is commonly acknowledged are all connected. At the same time organisations implicitly choose a balance between longer-term, organic processes of cultural change and shorter-term, more engineered and visible levers over behaviour. Our report also suggests that the TLD model, which has been promoted as a solution to the financial crisis, should be examined at more carefully and critically for its side-effects.

Any research report is limited in time and space, by its methods and by data availability. It is part of the culture of financial organisations that they are not naturally open to external researchers and we have been unusually fortunate with our participant organisations for the access they have afforded us, for their trust in our processes and for their candour in interacting with us for the public good. This is very much their report.

We hope that our study will provide additional awareness of the complex challenges facing CROs, CEOs and Boards who genuinely wish to influence the cultural conditions under which risk-taking and control activity happens in their organisations. Our principal prescription is that there is a need for financial organisations to be aware of the many trade-offs we have identified – including what kind of relationship to have with the regulator - to monitor these trade-offs, and to make explicit decisions about them where possible, rather than allowing them simply to happen to the organisation. When it comes to risk culture, our report suggests that it is not only the level of risk-taking that was deviant in many organisations. It was also the lack of this organisational self-knowledge and the authority to act upon it.

We have documented a number of questions arising from our work as a pathway to achieving this awareness. We have not sought however to position our work as another advisory offering. The fact that the questions we pose are not easy to answer in a familiar practical way does not mean that they are not important. Indeed, we think they require the closest consideration.

The Research Team

Principal investigator

Michael Power is Professor of Accounting and Director of the Centre for the Analysis of Risk and Regulation (CARR) at the London School of Economics. He is a Fellow of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW), an Associate member of the UK Chartered Institute of Taxation and an Honorary Fellow of the Institute of Risk Management. Since May 2005 he has been a non-executive Director of St James's Place plc where he is chair of the risk committee. Power holds an honorary doctorate in Economics from the University of St Gallen, Switzerland and an Honorary Doctorate in Social Science from the University of Uppsala, Sweden. His research and teaching focuses on regulation, accounting, auditing, internal control and risk management. His major work, *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification* (Oxford 1997) has been translated into Italian, Japanese and French. *Organized Uncertainty: Designing a World of Risk Management* (Oxford 2007) has been translated into Japanese. He has given evidence to both the UK Treasury Committee and the House of Lords Economic affairs committee regarding the role of auditors. Email: m.k.power@lse.ac.uk

Simon Ashby is Associate Professor in Financial Services at the Plymouth Business School and Head of the Accounting and Finance Discipline Group. Prior to this he was a Lecturer in Risk Management at Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Nottingham, a regulator (writing policy on risk management at the UK Financial Services Authority) and a practicing risk manager in a number of large and small banks. Simon has a PhD in corporate risk management and has published many academic papers in respected journals (e.g. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, *Geneva Papers*, *Safety Science*, *Risk*, *Decision and Policy*), book chapters, professional articles and industry reports in the fields of risk management and financial services. This recently included a major study into the causes of the financial crisis and the risk management lessons that need to be learned (*Picking up the Pieces: Risk Management in a PostCrisis World*). Simon remains actively involved in the financial services sector and is a Fellow and the Chairman-Elect of the Institute of Operational Risk. Email: simon.ashby@plymouth.ac.uk

Tommaso Palermo is a Lecturer at the London School of Economics – Department of Accounting. Tommaso has a PhD in Management, Economics and Industrial Engineering (Politecnico di Milano, Italy). His research and teaching focuses on the roles and uses of management control systems, the relation between risk management and performance management and management accounting innovations in the public sector. Email: t.palermo@lse.ac.uk

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