Risk anticipation protocol

Discussion document

Even well-planned projects can go off the rails

It is not uncommon for **critical priorities to fall short of expectations because of predictable roadblocks.**

Why do we miss planning for mishaps that seem obvious in retrospect?

When planning a project, we are in the "happy flow" mindset, **in which risks are often underestimated.**

This can result in **lost trust, wasted time, or worse yet, an undelivered priority which negatively impacts students and families.**

Risk anticipation reviews create a bridge between good intentions and strong execution

Risk anticipation reviews are conversations where a group explores the hypothetical case that **an initiative or project fails** in order to **uncover potential root causes and plan effectively for the future.**

Risk anticipation reviews allow project leaders to "**flow water through the pipes**" of any project plan, identifying cracks or leaks.

These conversations ask people to take a step back and uncover what suboptimal outcomes are in the realm of possibility. It also does this free from failure blame, **encouraging more honest, collaborative conversations.**

Risk anticipation reviews provide a **protocol** to include these discussions in existing meetings, **building a habit** for more thoughtful planning.

Risk anticipation reviews in action

A large, urban district held a series of **risk anticipation reviews** with their senior leadership team on their highest-priority efforts.

These conversations surfaced **opportunities to improve existing plans**:

- The district was in the process of developing and **rolling out a new principal evaluation structure tied to increased pay.** Conversations surfaced two potential failure modes: (1) inconsistency between evaluators eroding trust in and efficacy of the initiative, (2) metrics included in the evaluation leading to unintended consequences for staffing. As mitigating steps, the group brainstormed **additional alignment measures for the qualitative evaluation and committed to reevaluating the potential unintended consequences through additional working groups.**

- The district identified **staffing shortages** as a critical point of failure in **addressing students' unfinished learning** resulting from COVID-19. In response, they decided to immediately **increase substitute salaries** to head-off potential shortages down the line, and developed **a new cross-functional taskforce** to address talent pipeline and training needs.

*"The Risk Review Protocol **allowed us to analyze complicated projects with a cross-functional team** in a relatively short amount of time.*

*The framework pushed us to **view these projects with a more critical lens**, rather than just making plans based on best-case scenarios.*

*We all agreed it was a valuable exercise, and there was a **strong desire to use it again in the future with other projects"***

- Director of Innovation and Strategic Partnerships at a large, urban school district

This approach can illuminate challenges or surface solutions for a wide range of applications

Potential applications	Potential failure modes	Potential mitigating steps
Bond initiative and building update and redesign	There is not enough community engagement. Building upgrades are distributed based on loudest voices, not equity. Academics team is not sufficiently bought-in.	Hold community meetings, with a focus on historically underrepresented neighborhoods. Develop clear and transparent criteria for prioritizing upgrades, with input from educators.
New family engagement plan	School leaders are not bought in and do not message to school staff. Engagement methods aren't successful with parents.	Leverage campus data to anchor principals on the "why," including asks to explicitly model actions. Speak to key parent influencers to design plans; track success and iterate on things that don't work.
A change to student wellbeing protocols on campus	Non-teachers are not included and so change doesn't cascade to non-instructional times. Process adds to social workers' plates and they do not follow-through.	Work with non-instructional staff to message the "why" and hold training sessions. Create a social worker focus group to test and design changes; ask that group to help communicate the change.
Initiatives designed to address learning loss	Sub-populations do not make the same progress as the general population. Teachers and students fall through the cracks. Campuses do not regularly track data so they learn too late that the interventions do not work.	Track data by sub-population; develop data review protocols for teachers and campus leaders; include data conversations with principal leaders. Review data on a bi-monthly basis; report out at executive team meetings with the superintendent.

Leveraging risk anticipation reviews in your context

1 **Determine who in your SEA or LEA will organize and train staff on risk anticipation reviews.**

- This may be someone senior with the ability to coordinate between teams, with strong analytical tools and ability to influence the organization (e.g., a Chief of Staff).

2 **Select an initiative or project key to a broader priority's success.**

- This could be small enough to have a single clear owner, but important enough to justify gathering a cross-functional team to analyze. It should also support the strategic plan of your organization.
- Work with the project owner to prepare for the conversation (~20-30 minutes). See sample questions in the appendix of this document.
- Examples could include a strategy to mitigate COVID-19 learning loss, a new student wellbeing initiative, a teacher compensation plan, or an alternative approach to family engagement.

3 **Assemble a cross-functional team to analyze the project plan, considering leveraging existing meeting cadences.**

- Include any departments that work with potential stakeholders.
- Include any departments that have completed similar efforts in the past. Think outside of the box (e.g., the Transportation Department may have experience with family-outreach campaigns).

4 **Hold risk anticipation conversations.**

- In this document is a scripted protocol for a 60-minute conversation.
- The project owner will emerge with a set of tactical mitigating steps to incorporate in their broader effort.

Risk anticipation reviews can happen across a project lifecycle: in the planning phase, early launch, or mid-project.

For additional tools to facilitate detailed project planning, consult CFC's implementation Engine.

Risk anticipation review protocol (60 minutes)

1. [5 mins] Initiative is introduced to group by initiative owner, including goal, vision for success, associated metrics, and major milestones/progress to date.

2. [10 mins] Group members ask clarifying questions on above topics. For example: What risks have emerged already? What data have you tracked? What issues typically slow down or trip up your organization?

3. [5 mins] Group silently reflects on questions listed on the next page. Assume this initiative fails. What went wrong?

4. [15 mins] Group shares out on potential issues that have caused the initiative to go off track; note taker tracks ideas on flipchart.

5. [5 mins] Group sorts issues based on likelihood and impact on handouts.

6. [20 mins] Starting with the high likelihood/high impact quadrant, group identifies at least 1 mitigating step and records it in handout. Group repeats process with each quadrant based on available time.

Facilitation tips

60 minutes is a baseline time for 7-10 participants, though larger groups may require additional time.

Consider keeping a "parking lot" to maintain focus on the initiative at hand, while tracking topics for future discussion.

If doing this in person, consider extending time, and using chart paper and sticky notes to group risks either by category (e.g., capabilities, equity) or by likelihood and impact (jumpstarting step 5).

If doing this online, consider using Google Jamboard (or a similar online tool) to keep the conversation interactive.

Cheat sheet: Reflection questions by phase

NOT EXHAUSTIVE

Understanding the problem
- Are the project owners clear on the problem?
- Does the project address the root cause of the issue?

Stakeholder engagement
- Were stakeholders consulted in diagnosing and understanding the problem?
- Were stakeholders consulted on the solution?

Planning
- Are decision rights and role clarity determined and communicated?
- Were potential impacts on equity (both positive and negative) assessed and discussed?
- Has finance been consulted and is there a plan for the long-term?
- Is there a clear vision for success? Are there attached metrics?
- Is there a plan for ongoing tracking and monitoring?

Communication
- Has the change, including the why, been effectively communicated?
- Is there an ongoing communication plan so the initiative doesn't feel like a one-off effort?

Continuous improvement
- Is there a way to evaluate the effectiveness of the project on an ongoing basis?
- How can we track whether access is equitable and we are producing the intended outcomes?

Answers to risk anticipation questions can also inform initiative design and planning, as outlined in the Implementation Engine

Sample participant materials

Initiative name:

Notes on the initiative, including any clarifying questions	Risks or failure modes you're worried about	Potential mitigating steps

Implementation risk review discussion

Project title

Why did the project fail?

01 …

02 …

03 …

04 …

05 …

06 …

07 …

08 …

09 …

10 …

Plot the risks / reasons for failure on the two-by-two matrix

Likelihood — What is the likelihood of this risk/reason for failure?

	High likelihood	Address as part of implementation plan	Address as a priority
	Low likelihood	Deprioritize	Develop contingency plans
		Low impact	**High impact**

Impact — How much impact does this risk/reason for failure have on my project?

Implementation risk review discussion

Point of failure	Mitigation step	Action owner	Due date
Point 1			
Point 2			
Point 3			
Point 4			
Point 5			
Point 6			
Point 7			
Point 8			

Sample template to prepare with initiative owners

Initiative name:

Initiative lead:

Initiative approvers:

Initiative working team:

Contributors:

Mechanisms to monitor progress:

Ultimate goal and scope of this initiative

Key stakeholders

Major milestones, including when they will be done and by whom

Key performance indicators

Dependencies

Risks and challenges