



BRYAN WHITEFIELD



RISK WORKSHOP FACILITATION

The Art and Science of Facilitating
Critical Conversations

Written By
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ABOUT THIS PAPER

The biggest thrill I get in my role guiding organisations to develop stronger and stronger approaches to risk-based decision making, is when I run a risk workshop. In particular, for an executive team or board. In these moments they place their trust in you. Trusting that what they say will never be repeated by me, that the time will be valuably spent and that improved understanding of the risks they face will be the result.

My aim is always to have the Chair, CEO or Team Leader say to me at the end of the workshop, something like this:

“Thank you. We’ve never had a conversation quite like that before.”

Why is it that it needs to come to this? Why have they not had such a conversation in the past?

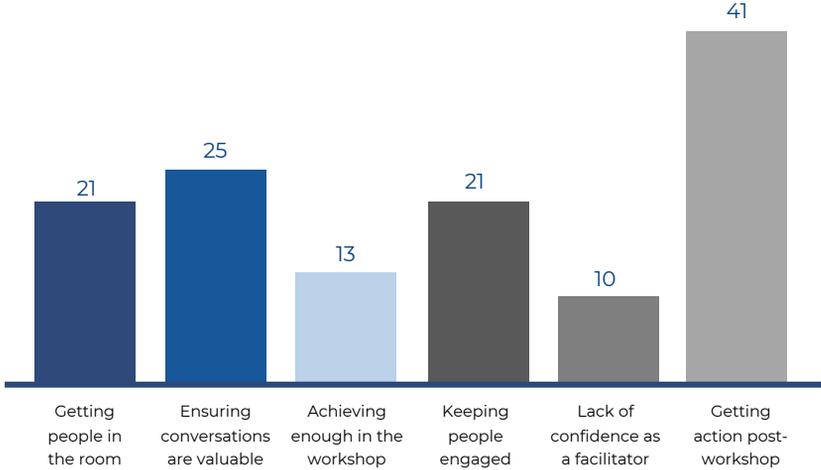
Read on to find out.

BARRICADES

Trying to get people, the right people, to a workshop and have them prepared and present in the moment is like trying to scale a barricade. They have so many defenses put up. In part because they are busy. Very busy. Sometimes it's in part because of an attitude of "We already have robust conversations. We discuss risks to the business all the time." Sometimes it is because they haven't had a good experience of risk workshops in the past and don't see them as a good use of their time.

Just prior to preparing this paper I ran a one-hour masterclass on risk workshop facilitation for around 100 people. The results of the poll I ran about their greatest challenges in running successful risk workshops are shown below.

What are your greatest challenges in facilitating risk workshops?



While ensuring conversations are valuable, and getting people in the room featured prominently, getting traction after the workshop was the number one problem. Why would getting traction post-workshop be the biggest challenge? The answer must be a lack of value. If the team involved found the workshop of sufficient value, they would act on what they learned. And if they did not get sufficient value, should you be surprised people don't want to attend risk workshops or that leaders don't want their teams tied up in risk workshops?

Now ask yourself why teams may not be sufficiently valuing your workshops. Then ask yourself how prepared were you? An underprepared workshop is a recipe for mediocrity. Why might you underprepare? Because you are as busy as they are! Busy, busy, busy!

If you underprepare you tend to underwhelm people, even bore them. The content is ho-hum. You have not been able to get them to think broadly or deeply enough. They don't want to come back.

However, let's assume for a moment you do prepare, and you feel your ability to help them think in the workshop is sufficient. What else might be a problem? Perhaps they have had a prior bad experience from another time, another place?

I've seen it in their eyes when my clients suggest to the executive that we run a risk workshop. Perhaps the facilitator followed a drab, mechanical process to collect risks for the beloved "risk register". Maybe they had a much worse experience. Maybe they felt like they had taken a trip to the dentist and were unexpectedly facing a tooth extraction. They were not bored; they were pained by aimless discussions about "inherent risk" or "risk velocity" or "line 1 vs line 2". Not to mention a discussion about extremely remote risks like meteorites taking out part of the country (OK – I'm exaggerating but I hope you get my point).

If you have this situation, you are in a dark place and you will need all your powers of persuasion to turn things around. One thing I do know about is persuasion which you can read more about in my book [Persuasive Advising: How to Turn Red Tape into Blue Ribbon](#) and it starts with understanding the value proposition you are offering.

YOUR VALUE PROPOSITION

Value is in the eye of the beholder. To consider your value proposition you must first stand in their shoes. These people are decision makers. What is a decision? It is making a choice under uncertainty. If there was no choice, there would be no decision to be made. The essence of your offer is to help them understand the uncertainty surrounding their decisions. Something commonly called Sensemaking.

Take a moment to consider Figure 1 below to identify where you sit in terms of the value you add. On the bottom rung of the ladder, you are extracting risks like a dentist extracts teeth. Pulling them out for them. For them it is painful, and it means they want to avoid you at all costs.

Figure 1: The Value Delivered in Risk Workshops

Workshop Approach	Participant Experience	Your Status
Sensemaking	Insightful	Valued
Collecting	Mechanical	Respected
Extracting	Painful	Avoided

On the second rung of the ladder they are bored because you are collecting risks in a mechanical manner. Moving from one to the next, as quickly as possible, to get as much done as possible in the limited time. You gain their respect because so many boxes are ticked so quickly. Good job. Nothing to see here for another quarter, six months or even a year!

However, if you want to be valued, you need to deliver value. To do that you must deliver insights and help them make sense of their uncertain, complex world. Trust me, they will thank you for it.

And how am I going to do that I hear you ask? Through a conversation they have never had before of course!

INVALUABLE CONVERSATIONS

The secret to an outstanding risk workshop is facilitating an invaluable conversation (see Figure 2 below – Invaluable Conversations), where an invaluable conversation helps the team to make much more sense of the crazy world we live in - sensemaking.

Two things are needed. A trusting environment and true insights into the decisions that need to be made by the team. As the diagram shows, if you are unable to create a trusting environment, nor provide insights, the conversations are meaningless, and the results are nonsense.

If you achieve one and not the other, you either have pleasant conversations in a trust-only environment or awkward ones when insights are delivered in the absence of trust. Both are a form of lost opportunity.

Figure 2: Invaluable Conversations



Now I hear you asking, how do you consistently deliver invaluable conversations for the teams you serve? Before I answer that question, let me confirm for you that you are the right person for the job.

YOU ARE PERFECT FOR THIS

A well-run risk workshop makes the team you are serving think differently, and when they think differently, they unlock the solutions to the challenges they knew of and many they had no idea they had or could not articulate. Why you are the perfect person for this is because we think differently.

Let me explain.

A few years back I had a coffee with a senior risk professional from a very large organisation in a high-risk industry. He started the meeting quite flabbergasted. He told me he had just come from a two-hour workshop with a bunch of engineers. They had been discussing one of the organisation-ending enterprise risks that had been identified. The engineers were explaining the controls they had in place. After two hours he explained to them why the controls would not work and excused himself to go to his next meeting (with me where he needed to vent).

It made me reflect that our backgrounds and training as risk professionals mean we have the key skill that is critical thinking. The ability to see different angles, identify challenges and scope out solutions. The challenge for us is not our ability to help them with some critical thinking, it is to catch them long enough to demonstrate our value. We need to catch their attention, get them thinking without them feeling like we are being negative or critical to then open their eyes to the possibilities you can see. The POSITIVE as well as the NEGATIVE.

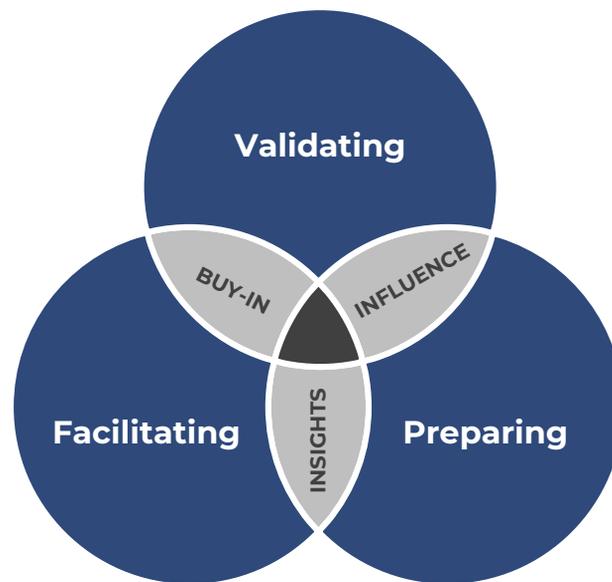
Now let's talk about how you'll generate invaluable conversations.

GUN FACILITATOR

You are a gun facilitator. The fact that you already facilitate workshops means you are a gun. Not everyone is willing to hold and guide a room. However, if the results you have been getting don't feel top gun, it's just your methods that need to catch up with you.

Here is my three-step process for facilitating sensemaking risk workshops (see Figure 3). I'll give you a quick tip: the same overarching process would apply for any workshop you might facilitate, risk workshop or not. However, within each step in the process are some critical components that create - and land - invaluable conversations about risk.

Figure 3: Risk Workshops are for Sensemaking



PREPARING

As a risk professional I naturally tend to be prepared. Plus, I was a boy scout! But what do I prepare? I prepare more than you might think. If you look at the intersection on the diagram between Preparing and Facilitating, you will see the word “insights”. Yes, I prepare insights, and in the room I facilitate discussions that give the team the insights they need. I do this through preparing a range of insight tools.

My favourite insight tools are listed below. I have more on my website along with [examples](#):

- Stakeholder Analysis to identify key opportunities or vulnerabilities associated with key stakeholders that have not previously been identified by the management team. [Sample](#).
- PESTLE Analysis to conduct or update the organisations previous environmental scans to help establish current and emerging challenges for the organisation. [Sample](#).
- My Capability Analysis which is a method for assessing internal performance capability by identifying strengths and weaknesses across the five key building blocks of an organisation – Strategy, People, Processes, Assets and Culture. [Sample](#).

If you use these types of tools to help you and them with their critical thinking, to provide insights and open eyes, you will provide more value than ever before. You will have a seat at the table as a highly respected *facilitator of critical conversations that help ensure the future success of your organisation*.

There are many other elements of being prepared. Examples include choosing to start with a shorter workshop until you get more buy-in, gaining a strong understanding of the team in the room, and working to ensure I have a senior stakeholder as a “friend in the room” if the conversations prove difficult. For example, I always request to meet the chair of a board and the CEO to ensure they know they are going to get value, so they set the right scene for the workshop with executive and board. For more I would encourage you to read a book on facilitating (e.g. [Nimble: Off Script but Still on Track](#) by Rebecca Sutherns) or come to my [training program](#) for budding risk workshop facilitators 😊.

FACILITATING

There are four key steps to facilitating a workshop. The Setup, Conversing, Tipping Points and Collation.

The Setup is setting the scene early so the workshop flows. Things like clarity of objectives, the roles people need to play. Conversing is about how to keep the conversation going and ensuring it is valuable. For example, concentrate the conversation on the issues with non-risk language and leave the technical stuff like risk ratings and control effectiveness ratings for the end or even for after the workshop. Tipping Points are those difficult moments like the one I describe below. You must have some coping strategies to ensure you deal with them. And finally, Collation, making sure you have recorded key outcomes and have commitment for actions required post the workshop.

While I would love to have a rich conversation on these topics, I want to keep this paper reasonably short. These are just reminders of the facilitation skills you need in the room. However, I will leave you with this one tip:

You are likely to have experienced at least one awkward moment (maybe more) as a facilitator. I know I have. One I often speak about is when I was facilitating a workshop for a board. At one end of the boardroom table a board member said there was too much detail in general in the risk profile we had pre-prepared. At the other end of the table another wanted more detail on a topic of interest to them. Both were quite animated for their positions of wanting less and wanting more and I could feel the value being experienced dwindling by the minute. At the end of the workshop, I remarked to my client about the ‘too much content’ versus the ‘need to know more’ moment. His response to me: “Welcome to my world, everyone wants summary in detail!”

The problem was twofold. First, I had not prepared the audience well-enough on what was being presented, how it all fit together and the thinking that had gone into it. Second, despite my best efforts, I had not met the board chair. I had not met anyone on the board. I did not have a friend in the room.

The more I facilitated over the years the more I realised that the type of preparation I described in the previous section is the secret to success. Now I rarely have a tense moment. On the contrary, I get high praise. None higher than the CEO of HammondCare, Mike Baird, when he declared at the end of the first of five division workshops: “That was illuminating!”.

Yes, experience breeds success. However, in the absence of experience as a facilitator: BE PREPARED.

VALIDATING

The workshop is over. The hard work is done. The Chair, CEO or Team Leader has taken you aside and thanked you for such an enlightening workshop. Job done!

No, it's not.

The last thing you need to do is make sure you are helping the team with sensemaking, not nonsense-making. The key is a reality-check with the team post the workshop. Not straight after, at least a day, if not a week. Let memories wane a little and then revisit the outcomes and ask a few questions like whether it passes the pub test, or if the data supports the risk ratings or if the risk treatments and their timeframes are achievable.

What's next for you?

Your goal must be to be known as the facilitator of invaluable conversations. If you nail that, you nail your career as a risk professional.

To achieve your end goal, set yourself the goals you will need to hit along the way. For example, do you need to work on your preparation? If so, do so and don't limit your preparation to those I listed above. There are so many options.

Maybe you need to improve your facilitation. Why not ask for someone to sit in on your next facilitation and ask them to rate how you handled the four key steps I outlined above and get their tips on how you could have done better.

And have a think about what you do post workshop. Put some time in your diary after each workshop and call it something significant like “Sensemaking Time” to trigger self-reflection for you and the team on the outcomes of the workshop.

And if you want to go deep on facilitating sensemaking, please come to my next Mastering Risk Workshop Facilitation [training program](#).

All the best with your next workshop!

ABOUT BRYAN



Bryan is a management consultant operating since 2001. He is a specialist in risk-based decision making, strategic leadership and strategic planning born from his more than twenty years of facilitating executive and board workshops. Bryan's experience as a risk practitioner includes the design and implementation of risk management programs for hundreds of organisations across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. Bryan is the author of **DECIDE: How to Manage the Risk in Your Decision Making**, a book for strategic leaders who wish to minimise the time taken to get to the right decision; **Persuasive Advising: How to Turn Red Tape into Blue Ribbon** that teaches you practical methods to cut through with your advice and make the impact you want to make; and **Risky Business: How Successful Organisations Embrace Uncertainty (Amazon Best Seller)** that is a guide to the most successful way to design and embed an effective risk framework.

Bryan also authored the Australian Government's Risk Management Benchmarking Survey for more than 120 Government agencies from 2002-2005, lectured in the Principles of Risk Transfer in the Masters in Risk Management program of Monash University from 2002 – 2006 and designed and delivers the Risk Management Institute of Australasia's flagship Enterprise Risk course since 2019.

Bryan has assisted clients across all sectors including:

- Australian Government agencies such as the Departments of Foreign Affairs, Environment, Finance, Industry, Defence, Health and Social Services.
- State Government Agencies Fire and Rescue NSW, NSW Police, NSW Health local health districts, TAFE and the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services.

- Not-for-Profit organisations such as AWI, Cancer Council Australia, CBM, Cerebral Palsy Alliance, HCF, IRT, QSuper, Ronald McDonald House Charities, Uniting Care and Unitywater.
- Private Sector organisations such as Brisbane Airport, Brookfield Multiplex, Employers Mutual, FM Global, Downer, G&S, McConnell Dowell, Navitas, Pro Pac, QBE, Santos, Suncorp, Symbion, Weir Minerals and Xstrata.

Bryan was President and Chair of the Board of the Risk Management Institute of Australasia (RMIA) from 2013 through 2015, and is licensed by RMIA as a Certified Chief Risk Officer (CCRO).

Bryan is also a certified Virtual Presenter.

To hear firsthand what Bryan's clients say about him, please check out this [video](#).



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