Not (What) If, But When

Rethinking Risk Management in the Certainty of Uncertainty

In a world once governed by probabilities, we used to ask: *"What if?"*.
What if a cyberattack brought our operations down?
What if a major economic downturn hit global markets?
What if political unrest disrupted our supply chain?

A few years back, I would, more often than not, come across these scenario planning exercises in meetings; *what-if* analysis was treated as a compliance tool – a checklist item to align with best practices, not to drive real change.

We would explore hypothetical disruptions, document the steps we might take *if* they ever materialized, and file the report away. The unspoken assumption was that these scenarios, no matter how severe on paper, were unlikely to occur. Even our most 'extreme' cases rarely went beyond a large-scale cyber-attack, power outage, or supply chain interruption. Serious, yes, but still within the boundaries of control.

This kind of analysis wasn't about anticipation or prevention. It was about listing options, not taking action. And if it revealed anything, it was a prevalent mindset that resisted the idea that systems could truly unravel, that events could unfold beyond our models, or that the improbable might actually become inevitable.

But as we navigate a world marked by rising geopolitical instability, exceptional technological risks, climate disruption, and systemic economic shocks, it's clear that we must evolve our thinking. The question is no longer *"What if?"* but, *"But when?"*.

We are no longer dealing with hypothetical possibilities. We are managing the inevitability of low-frequency, high-severity events. These are not black swans. They are now recurring realities.

The velocity of disruption has never been higher. From ransomware shutting down major infrastructure to extreme weather wiping out agricultural economies, to pandemics affecting supply chains and destabilizing economies worldwide, the threats we once modeled as tail risks are occurring with increasing frequency and compounding impact. This demands a shift in mindset, one that no longer frames rare events as outliers, but as part of the strategic landscape.

Traditional risk management was often anchored in prediction. Today, that is not enough. Our goal must be to visualize multiple futures, prepare for them, and remain agile in our response. It's not about knowing *what* will happen, it's about being ready for *when* it does.

This demands a risk management strategy that blends foresight with resilience, and scenario planning with operational flexibility – and most importantly, one that is affordable and actionable.

So, how do we navigate this ground without bearing unsustainable costs?

The answer lies in leveraging the power of *"What if"* scenarios, not to instill fear, but to trigger strategic foresight. Scenario-based planning remains one of the most powerful tools in risk management. It allows organizations to test the resilience of their strategies against multiple disruptions, identify blind spots and interdependencies, allocate resources more intelligently, and build contingency plans that are not only reactive but preemptive.

Done correctly, *"What if"* becomes the architecture of *"But when"* readiness.

The path to resilience doesn't lie in eliminating risk, but in understanding and absorbing it intelligently. Regardless of size or sector, organizations must develop risk strategies that are adaptive, cost-conscious, and deeply integrated into strategic planning. Here are key principles to guide that approach:

1. **Integrate scenario planning into strategy**
   Don't relegate *"What if"* thinking to crisis teams or risk functions. Scenario planning should inform core decision-making, allowing leadership to make choices based on a range of plausible futures.

2. **Design for flexibility, not just efficiency**
   Traditional risk management has typically focused on optimization and control. Today, the ability to pivot quickly, absorb shocks, and operate through disruption is just as vital as cost efficiency.

3. **Break down silos**
   Risk is rarely isolated. Financial risks influence operational ones, which can trigger reputational consequences. A cross-functional view with strong internal communication ensures risks are not just tracked, but truly understood within their context.

4. **Enhance situational awareness**
   Invest in tools that increase visibility into emerging risks. Whether through AI-powered analytics, geopolitical monitoring, or industry coalitions, knowledge is your early warning system.

5. **Embed a resilient culture**
   Beyond frameworks and systems, resilience is a mindset. It involves empowering teams to speak up, act decisively, and adapt quickly when the unexpected occurs. Leaders must champion this culture from the top down.

6. **Align risk appetite with strategy**
   Risk resilience doesn't mean avoiding all risk. It means understanding which risks you're willing to take. Clear articulation of risk appetite ensures that risk-taking aligns with opportunity, not just avoidance.

7. **Innovate**
   Innovation is not a luxury in risk management, it's an imperative. Those who invest in

innovative thinking, systems, and culture are better positioned to visualize multiple futures and act with confidence, no matter what comes.

Ultimately, transitioning from *“What if?”* to *“But when?”* is not only a technical, but also a cultural upgrade. It’s about embedding resilience into how decisions are made.

In a world where disruption is not an anomaly but a constant, the institutions that thrive will be those that have already stopped asking *if* the storm would come, and started preparing for when it does.