

The Risk Reflex:
Engineering Reflexive
Risk Ownership
Across the Business



The new reality of risk ownership

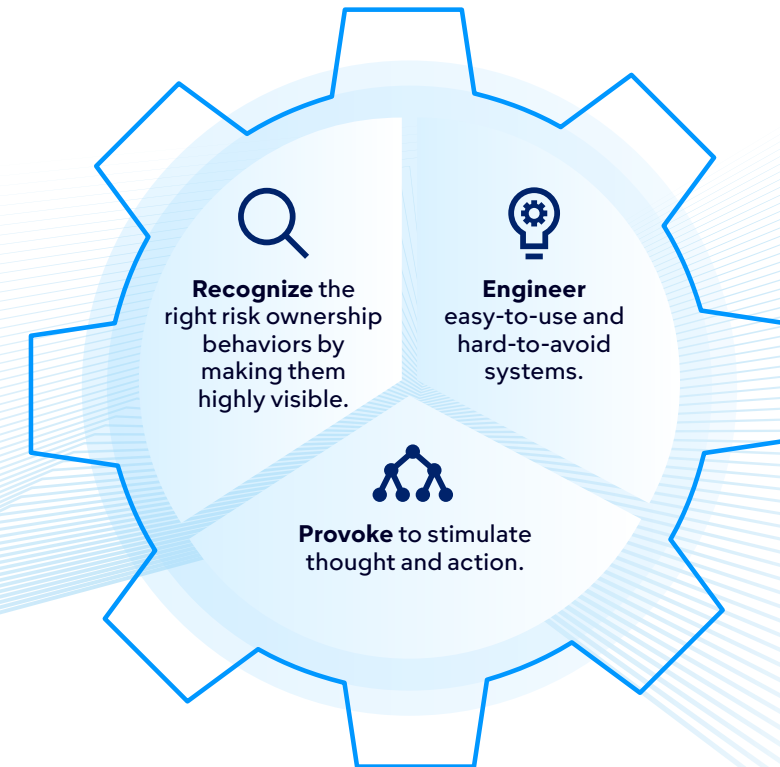
Complexity and interconnectivity define today’s risk landscape. According to Gartner, two-thirds of risk leaders struggle to distinguish between emerging and enterprise risks, indicating that a growing percentage of organizations’ risk portfolios are unstable. Additionally, CEOs are increasingly elevating risk management as a personal priority, with a 50% increase in the percentage of CEOs citing it as a top issue since last year.

Such challenging, heightened expectations for effective risk management creates a unique opportunity for audit, risk and compliance (assurance) leaders to improve the organization’s risk reflexes — that is, risk owners’ ability to recognize and respond to risk and control responsibilities as quickly, thoroughly and autonomously as the current environment requires.

To condition these automatic responses, assurance leaders must focus on three core pillars:

- Engineer systems to make risk ownership hard to avoid.
- Provoke thought and action at key moments.
- Recognize and reward reflexive risk ownership behaviors.

The risk reflex



Source: Gartner



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Pillar 1

Engineer systems to make risk ownership hard to avoid

Simplified tools and processes do not guarantee quality risk outcomes. For instance, when the risk assessment is easier to complete, we observe a maximum of just 2% improvement in the comprehensiveness of responses. To close the risk-ownership gap, assurance leaders must go beyond making risk management easy and engineer systems that are also hard to avoid.

Hard-to-avoid systems deliver undeniable value and visibility that the business wouldn't want to miss – and couldn't miss, even if they tried.

Core elements of a hard-to-avoid system:

- **Prominence:** Design tools and processes that risk owners cannot miss.
- **Unmatched utility:** Deliver exceptional value, making avoidance difficult to justify.
- **High visibility:** Expose avoidance through noticeably inferior work products or peer pressure.

- Key actions for assurance leaders:**
- **Centralize capabilities:** Merging independent systems – such as integrating third-party risk management into the primary contract management platform – eliminates alternatives and forces compliance.
 - **Embed workflows:** Hard-to-avoid design extends beyond technology by integrating risk ownership directly into business processes and decision points.

Risk owner expectations in typical vs. cross-functional risk ownership model

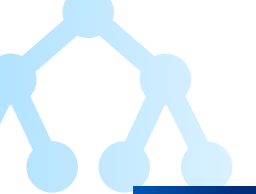
● Risk owner ▲ Swim lane owner

Performance expectation	Responsibilities in typical risk ownership model	Responsibilities in cross-functional risk ownership model
Build mitigation plans for all risk drivers	●	● ▲
Oversee mitigation implementation for all risk drivers	●	● ▲
Articulate overarching risk narrative	●	●
Achieve residual risk reduction targets	●	●
Provide clear, compelling updates to ERC	●	●

Risk owner struggles to build and oversee mitigations in areas where they lack expertise or familiarity.

Risk owner only builds and directly oversees mitigation plans in their area of expertise.

Source: Gartner



Pillar 2

Provoke thought and action at key moments

Repetitive surveys produce shallow answers. Reflexive risk ownership requires provocation — a clear stimulus that triggers deeper thinking and decisive action. High-performing assurance teams design interactions that challenge assumptions, introduce unfamiliar scenarios and deliver insights the business hasn’t already considered.

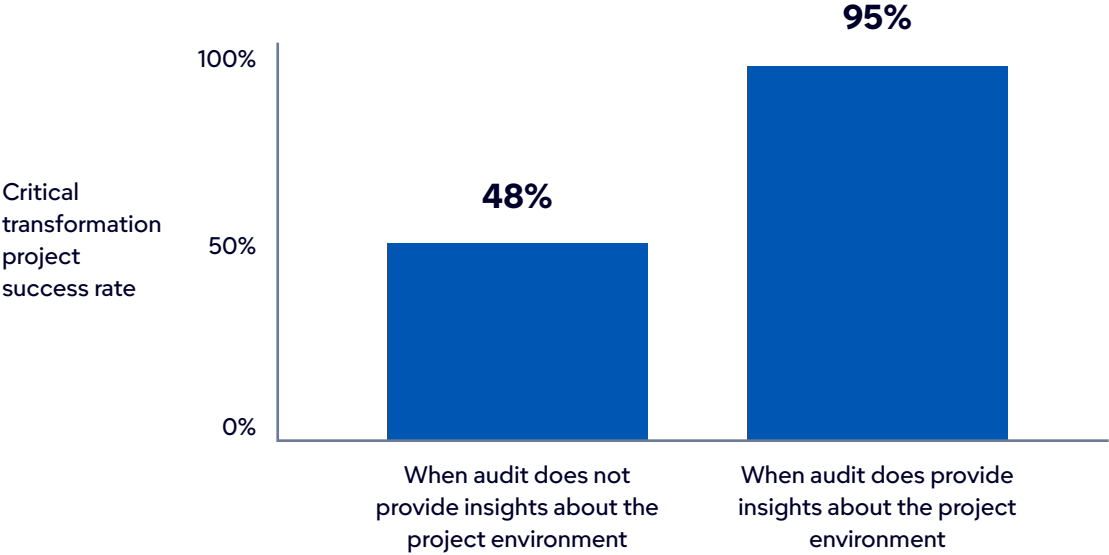
Key elements of provocation:

- **Challenge assumptions** to push beyond surface-level answers.
- **Introduce novel scenarios** to broaden risk perspective.
- **Prioritize material insights** that drive real decisions.

Key actions for assurance leaders:

- **Transform questionnaires:** Swap standard inquiries for challenging prompts (e.g., “What could cause us to miss business objectives?”).
- **Leverage AI perspectives:** Generative AI introduces independent KRIs that challenge assumptions and reveal new operational risks.

Critical transformation project success rate



Source: Gartner



Pillar 3

Recognize and reward reflexive risk ownership

Reflexive risk ownership is reinforced when the right behaviors are visible and recognized, but Gartner studies have found that less than a quarter of risk owners report receiving positive feedback from ERM. To cultivate reflexive ownership, organizations must highlight positive behaviors, creating a standard for others to emulate.

Blueprint for recognizing reflexive behavior:

- **Define excellence:** Clarify and document specific risk ownership behaviors worth recognizing.
- **Build visibility infrastructure:** Establish forums for peer-to-peer learning and showcase successful mitigation strategies.
- **Engage executive leadership:** Elevate proactive risk achievements to the C-suite, alongside outstanding control issues.

Key actions for assurance leaders:

- **Feature risk owners in scenario-based workshops:** An oil and gas company features risk owners in scenario-based workshops, generating constructive peer competition and sharpening risk knowledge and mitigation plans.
- **Include risk owners in executive dashboards:** A government administrative company uses executive dashboards to highlight areas where risk owners excel, encouraging the enterprise to emulate these highly visible, positive actions.





Recognition and reward defined

Recognition 	Reward 
<p>Recognition is about appreciating individuals and groups.</p> <p>Reason for receiving recognition:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Going the extra mile • Demonstrating company values • Innovation • Company culture contributions 	<p>Rewards add impact and meaning to recognition. Rewards can be monetary or nonmonetary.</p> <p>Reason for a reward:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides motivation to be recognized • Gives tangible appreciation to individuals • Shows management commitment to the recognition program

Source: Gartner

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