



Are you building your wings on the way down?

- **“Building your wings on the way down” is a reactionary way of dealing with undesirable events or risks.**
- **Performing risk assessments and implementing preventive control activities can help you become more proactive to risk.**

A recent radio advertisement touts the alleged advantage of being reactionary, by promoting “building your wings on the way down.” The advertiser asserts that humans come up with their most creative solutions during a crisis. Therefore, to continue the analogy, you do not jump from the airplane equipped with a hang glider or a parachute. Rather, you exit the airplane and build your wings during free fall, completing the task (hopefully!) in time to avoid crashing into the earth.

It may often seem that, as state employees, we are also building our wings on the way down. We all do a tremendous amount of fire fighting, working our way through previously unanticipated problems, in hopes of avoiding any huge crashes. However, as custodians of the state’s resources, we should look for opportunities to become more proactive, anticipate problems before they happen, and work out strategies in advance for coping with risks or adverse situations that have a significant likelihood of occurring.

There are two key opportunities to be more proactive in your approach to risk. They are performing risk assessments and putting preventive control activities into place.

Performing a risk assessment begins with thinking in advance “what could go wrong?” This is akin in the analogy to contemplating the landscape and the step-by-step process of the fall before getting into the airplane. Reviewing the logistics of the jump in advance makes you more prepared if or when you exit the airplane. Likewise, thinking about the possible risk scenarios in advance allows you to formulate efficient strategies and makes you more prepared for certain high probability negative situations. It also can help you identify the appropriate control activities to best mitigate the risks you have identified.

Control activities are those actions taken to eliminate or mitigate identified risks. They can be

separated into two distinct categories: detective and preventive controls. Detective controls such as reconciliations, while important, are reactionary in that they evaluate transactions or events that have already occurred. On the other hand, preventive controls like prior reviews and approvals, are controls used to identify undesirable events in advance and prevent or stop them from happening. As part of an effective control system strategy, preventive controls should be put into place to catch erroneous, inappropriate, or fraudulent transactions before they are processed. In other words, they provide the hang glider or parachute needed to land safely, thus avoiding a nasty crash.

A thoughtful risk assessment process takes time. To be effective, it needs the support of both senior leadership and those involved in the process. However, the long-term benefits of risk assessment for identifying risks and related control activities far outweigh the time spent in the short run. By strategically applying risk assessments and preventive control activities, you will reduce instances where you are caught building your wings on the way down.

Suggested action steps: Assess your typical day at work. Are you predominately building your wings on the way down? If so, make a commitment to spend time performing risk assessments on your most critical business processes. As part of each risk assessment, brainstorm about what could go wrong, identify control gaps, and develop strategies to mitigate those high risk situations, should they occur.

If you have questions, please contact Jeanine Kuwik at Jeanine.Kuwik@state.mn.us or (651) 201-8148.