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ECONOMICS

# RISK ORDERED PRIORITIZATION

A framework for making decisions under uncertainty

FOUNDATIONAL PAPER

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## Introduction

Prioritization exercises often fail because they are treated as idea ranking exercises. Teams bring forward initiatives, advocate for their own work and attempt to stack rank opportunities. Debate follows. Leadership arbitrates. Delivery teams wait.

The problem is not a lack of ideas. It is a lack of risk ordering.

The goal of prioritization is not to select the best ideas. It is to sequence risk so decisions are made early, transparently and consistently. This holds across product organizations, capital allocation, humanitarian operations, national security and even small community groups. The domain changes.

The logic does not.

A simple way to view this is through the lens of a product-focused technology company.

## A Risk-Ordered Prioritization Framework

### **Level 1:** Serve Paying Customers

Work that supports delivery of contracted value takes precedence over all other initiatives. Without cash flow from paying customers, the organization cannot function. Any work that threatens delivery must displace all other priorities.

### **Level 2:** Maintain Legal and Regulatory Compliance

Compliance is an existential constraint. If the organization cannot legally operate, it cannot serve customers or generate revenue. Some leaders argue this should precede Level 1. In practice, both represent non-negotiable conditions for survival.

### **Level 3:** Improve Retention

Once delivery and compliance are stable, attention shifts to retaining existing customers. Some attrition is normal, but retention reduces uncertainty, stabilizes forecasting and compounds value over time. A retained dollar is worth more than a new one because it lowers risk, not just cost.

### **Level 4:** Sell Existing Products to New Customers

This introduces trust risk but limits product risk. The product is known to work, the primary challenge is establishing credibility with new buyers. This is a relatively low-risk growth path compared to building new capabilities.

### **Level 5: Build New Products for Existing Customers**

At this level, trust exists but product risk increases. New offerings can strengthen relationships, but they also introduce execution risk and the possibility of disappointing current customers and increase the likelihood of overall attrition.

### **Level 6: Build New Products for New Customers**

This represents the highest uncertainty. Both product viability and customer trust are unproven. This work is not inherently wrong, but it should be undertaken deliberately and only once lower-risk priorities are secure and the organization can manage and navigate this level of risk.

## **Risk Is the Constant**

This same prioritization logic appears wherever decisions are made under uncertainty. In capital markets, risk is priced explicitly. Lower risk opportunities trade at lower expected returns. Higher risk ventures offer asymmetric upside but carry greater downside. Investors reduce uncertainty not by optimism, but by sequencing risk. They back proven teams, known markets or established products before taking larger bets.

In humanitarian operations and national security, the logic is the same but the consequences of mis-ordering are immediate. Prioritization is uncomfortable in rescue operations. Individuals with the highest probability of successful movement are prioritized first. Ambulatory evacuees precede non-ambulatory cases. Citizens precede immediate family members. Immediate family members precede extended dependents. This is not a moral judgment, it is a survivability calculation. Acting out of sequence risks failing everyone.

National security operates under the same constraint logic. States protect and stabilize core industrial and economic capabilities before projecting power outward. Control over energy, manufacturing capacity, logistics and supply chains precedes deterrence and escalation. External action becomes brittle, symbolic or unsustainable without a resilient base of strength.

In both cases, sequencing matters more than intent. Decisions made out of order amplify harm, even when objectives are legitimate. Survival precedes advantage. Stabilization precedes escalation. Systems that ignore this reality fail quietly at first and catastrophically later.

Risk is unavoidable. What varies is whether it is acknowledged early or absorbed later under pressure.

Effective prioritization frameworks do not eliminate tradeoffs. They make tradeoffs explicit before decisions are required. When risk is sequenced deliberately, execution becomes calmer, faster and more consistent, even in environments where certainty never arrives. The purpose of prioritization is not to choose the best ideas. It is to ensure the organization survives long enough to pursue them.

## About the Author

Austin works at the intersection of product strategy, finance and national security, focusing on the design of decision systems that help institutions operate under uncertainty. His work centers on translating reality into priorities, constraints and rules so decisions are made early, calmly and consistently rather than reactively or under pressure.

He currently leads platform strategy for Finance & Risk Solutions at Dun & Bradstreet, shaping shared services, AI/ML-powered analytics and self-service platforms across a global portfolio. He also serves as Chief Financial Officer of the Special Operations Association of America, where he focuses on capital stewardship, governance and operational sustainability in support of the special operations community.

In parallel, Austin has supported humanitarian evacuation and family reunification efforts during active conflicts, coordinating with NGOs and congressional offices under severe information and time constraints. He is a founding member of the Global Counterterrorism & Threat Intelligence Research Institute at UT Dallas and works on applied research at the intersection of data science, economics, OSINT and national security, with a particular focus on economic warfare and gray-zone competition.