Keeping ORM Simple

By LCdr. Brent Tornga,
VAQ-130

Many people get wrapped around the axle and create confusion and distaste for off-duty and operational risk management (ORM) when they overthink the principles and steps of this process.

For me, ORM doesn't take a 200-page instruction or a 50-slide PowerPoint presentation to explain. Rather, it takes a little practical application and one slide with about five bullets. It really is just common sense that can be used, no matter what you do.

Ask yourself a few questions before you engage in your next activity. Start by asking, "What am I going to be doing? Skiing the slopes? Changing the oil in my car? Moving an aircraft?"

How can I or someone else involved get hurt? What can I break or damage by not following a procedure? How do I prepare? These are just a few questions you should brainstorm to identify risks involved in the activity. You may come up with many more questions, some of which likely will have more than one answer.

For example, let's say you're going skiing. When asking the question about how you could get hurt, possible answers might include improper equipment, overconfidence, and/or unsuitable conditions. As you think about answers to this question, your attention could turn to questions about how you will get to the ski area. Is my vehicle prepared for winter-driving conditions? Will I need tire chains for my car? Do I have any chains? Is my car full of gas, oil, and wiper fluid?

After brainstorming some questions to identify the risks, you decide what you're going to do about the ones you identified—how you can minimize or manage them. In the skiing example, you would manage the

risk of getting to the ski area by checking your vehicle and the weather forecast. You also should check your route and ride with a buddy. Besides those precautions, you should take a cellphone; carry extra food, water, a blanket, and other clothing; and let someone know your plan (e.g., destination and expected time of return). Finally, you should identify the protective equipment you will need. Sounds like common sense—right? Well, that's what ORM is all about.

To complete the risk-management loop, you must analyze the risks and your risk-control measures to see if they are appropriate and are working. If not, you must modify your controls. The risk may be too great to accept without changing your control measures.

Continuing with the skiing example, if you know the weather is clear at the mountain and at your point of origin but ignore the route to get there, you've failed to identify a risk and to put a control measure into place. If, however, you know the weather along the route is forecast to improve after 1000, or that the route is clear, you have minimized the risk. You still may need to get additional weather updates throughout the day as conditions change.

After the trip, ask yourself if you encountered anything that wasn't forecast. Also ask, "Did I do what I could to prepare for contingencies?" If the answer is yes, you properly managed the risk and now are armed with a starting point for the next adventure. If, however, the answer is no, then you need to do more planning and better manage the weather-contingency risks for the next trip.

With practice, you will be able to assess the probability and severity of each risk. You can use numbers (e.g., 1 equals high, 5 equals low) or just general categories of high, medium and low. "Probability" is how likely the event will occur, and "severity" is the measure or potential for injury, fatality, damage or loss of equipment. You have to identify the threshold you are comfortable with accepting when engaging in recreational or other off-duty activities. Someone in your chain of command usually will dictate the level of risk that is acceptable for on-duty activities. In either case, you must strive to reduce the risk's probability or severity, or both. If your control measures don't accomplish that goal, you must modify the measures or reconsider the activity altogether.

Remember, ORM is not an additional requirement. It's a process that should be integral to all activities. It's a philosophy—a way of life. It does no good just to read about it, attend lectures and briefs about it, and keep a laminated card in your wallet. The key to success is to do all those things, then accept it as a tool and put it into everyday mainstream use. Think of ORM as my **O**bligation to **R**educe **M**ishaps, using an **O**ld-fashioned **R**ight-thing-to-do **M**indset.

In its simplest form, ORM is based on common sense, so don't overcomplicate it. Learn to think of it in terms of these questions: What am I doing? How can it bite me? What am I going to do to protect myself? How did it turn out? What have I learned? How can I do it better and safer next time?

Resources:

- Operational Risk Management(OpNavInst 3500.39B and MCO 3500.27), http://safetycenter.navy.mil/instructions/orm/3500_39B.pdf
- Operational Risk Management Indoctrination Training, http://safetycenter.navy.mil/presentations/orm/sourcefile/ormindoc.ppt
- Operational Risk Management (introduction to ORM, why ORM, ORM terms, etc.), http://safetycenter.navy.mil/orm/generalorm/introduction