



The RIMS Strategic and Enterprise Risk Center presents:

Merline Barrington

Program Director, Enterprise Risk Management
Port Authority of New York and New Jersey

Leveraging Business Principles in ERM

By Russ Banham

Embedding a holistic, data-driven, and forward-looking risk culture across all levels of the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey.



At the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, the ERM program has evolved into a trusted Agency function that informs both strategic direction and operational/business decision-making through a risk-based prioritization process. By embedding risk-informed thinking into everyday business practices, the program has successfully fostered an enterprise-wide risk culture

that breaks down operational silos across its diverse facilities and delivers measurable results that treat resilience as a core competitive advantage.

Founded in 1921 as a bi-state compact, the Port Authority manages a complex regional infrastructure network with approximately 8,000 employees. The Port Authority oversees the world's largest airport system, the East Coast's busiest container port, the PATH rail system, and the World Trade Center site. Operating in a high-stakes environment, the agency manages a diverse risk profile including capital project execution, climate resilience, and cybersecurity threats.

Leading this ERM program is Merline Barrington, RIMS-CRMP, a recipient of the 2025 RIMS Global ERM Award of Distinction. In December 2025, Barrington sat down with RIMS to discuss the agency's ERM program's evolution and standing, her philosophy of risk management, and the unique personal and professional skills she brings to the role. The Q&A that follows has been edited for clarity and concision. ■

RIMS: How did your early life guide you toward your current career in enterprise risk management?

Barrington: I grew up in a diverse neighborhood in Canarsie, Brooklyn, back in the early-1990s. Both my parents worked outside the home, so my grandmother was the primary caregiver. She spoke, French, Creole and Spanish, but not English. I would translate for her at the local grocery stores and even negotiate prices on her behalf to reach her goal of paying the most affordable price for items. These experiences taught me to assess a gap from various angles, identify the root cause of any misalignment and apply the most effective solution, even if that meant persuading my grandmother to select an alternative item or store. Leveraging my polyglot background in a close-knit immigrant family environment, I developed a natural skill for effective communication and a strong desire to help people overcome obstacles to reach their goals. This core passion for advocacy eventually evolved into a professional pursuit focused on making things better at a structural level in public services on which people rely daily. I then decided to obtain a master's [in Public Administration and Policy at John Jay College of Criminal Justice], aiming to impact large systems and government entities that affect our daily lives.

RIMS: What eventually brought you to the Port Authority?

Barrington: I learned through a mentor in graduate school about the Port Authority's Leadership Fellow Program—it is a highly selective, two-year rotational program for graduate students interested in public service and management. Participants in the program work on various key projects for 6 to 8 months in different departments, which appealed to me. I applied, entered the program in 2013, and two years later transitioned into enterprise risk, utilizing my public sector background. I have now spent a decade in risk, leading the division for eight years and culminating in my current role as the program's first director, reporting to the chief financial officer and the board of commissioners.

RIMS: What would you say during that time were the key factors contributing to the ERM program's success?

Barrington: Since taking on the role, we focused on some key areas, namely, clarifying our value proposition to the enterprise, our formal link to strategy and strengthening risk analysis. To confirm and express our value proposition, we evaluated the agency's risk capabilities and the unique value of the ERM program by leveraging the RIMS Risk Maturity Model. This helps us understand risk management capabilities, how effectively risks are managed across the enterprise and identify areas for improvement over time. We established a link to strategy by formalizing a top-down process that incorporates strategic priorities/goals, an executive level risk committee with ownership of key risk areas and an emerging risk practice. I also strongly believe in getting the job done and doing what you said you would. If I said I was going to help someone understand the cost impact of certain initiatives and inform resource allocations decisions, I am going to come back and tell you what I did and how I did it- which in turn strengthens the depth and relevance of risk analysis conducted. I'm a firm believer in that; I cannot tell you how important it is to do what you say you will do and communicate those results.

RIMS: Are there any other key initiatives during your leadership that you would like to mention?

Barrington: One thing we did was establish executive-level ownership for risk areas through our dedicated executive risk committee, ensuring all chiefs are aligned with key risk areas. We then infused the ERM program with emerging risk research and analysis, proactively identifying uncertainties that can reveal opportunities, a valuable approach during the pandemic when we focused on looking ahead. Now, we prioritize internal and external emerging risks to ensure strategic and operational resilience. We conduct research, collaborate on forward variables, and incorporate insights into workshops and meetings, challenging the status quo and expanding the risk dialogue—which I find exciting and vital for the agency's resilience.

RIMS: What are some of the ways you measure success?

Barrington: In addition to the RIMS Maturity Model, we conduct peer-to-peer benchmarking against comparable entities which helps identify future focus areas, such as leveraging AI for enhanced risk monitoring and insights. A big one for me is feedback. We conduct several ERM workshops across the enterprise for frontline stakeholders and afterwards, I reserve five to seven minutes for participants to complete a post-workshop survey, easily accessible via a QR code we display during workshop close out. This gives us feedback in real time. That comes directly from my upbringing—if my grandma paid more for groceries than she wanted, then I was not a successful negotiator, and she would give me feedback immediately.

RIMS: What were some of the challenges you experienced as you progressed in your role?

Barrington: Getting all the different departments on the same page about how we define and assess risks is an important contributor to our success. Every operation and business have their own culture and their own risk posture. We managed this by adopting a single way to talk about risk, a taxonomy. Then we



Merline Barrington accepts the RIMS ERM Global Award of Distinction at the RIMS ERM Conference 2025 in Seattle, Washington.

ran these cross-functional workshops to put the risks into context and prioritize them based on their financial and operational consequences.

RIMS: Earlier, you touched on the risk culture at the Port Authority. Aside from getting people to speak the same language when it came to risks and risk management, how else did you foster a risk-focused culture?

Barrington: We exist within the context of business; any business issue is a potential opportunity to apply risk principles to close the gap. We build credibility and relevance by leveraging core business principles because risk manifests in the context of business. When engaging departments, for instance, we use tools like a business model canvas and KPIs. This gives us a firm grasp of their business and credibility. As the leader of this function, I am always on the lookout for their business needs and risks and how to close that gap. Also, reporting is critical, and I believe in reporting risk results to decision-makers on every level so that risk results are incorporated in decisions made on each operational and business level. The risk results that go to the board are strategic in nature, more significant overarching topics that call for the attention of board members and the decisions they can make. When we pick up on a potential issue and help leaders strategize how to fix it with risk principles, that is ERM winning and really propels the program.

RIMS: What excites you about the future of the ERM program?

Barrington: I am genuinely excited by the Port Authority's proposed capital plan and strategic direction. The main reason is that a lot of those major decisions were actually influenced by the agency's due diligence and consideration of risk. Now, I get to walk along with the enterprise to truly understand how that strategic direction unfolds and what risks might lie ahead. Guided by the COSO 2017 revised framework, we'll continue to specifically link ERM with strategy and objective-setting, by focusing on risks because of strategy. I am also excited to continue collaborating with executive leaders and being an even closer partner by demonstrating the organizational advantages of an ERM program. ■

Russ Banham is a Pulitzer-nominated business journalist and best-selling author.