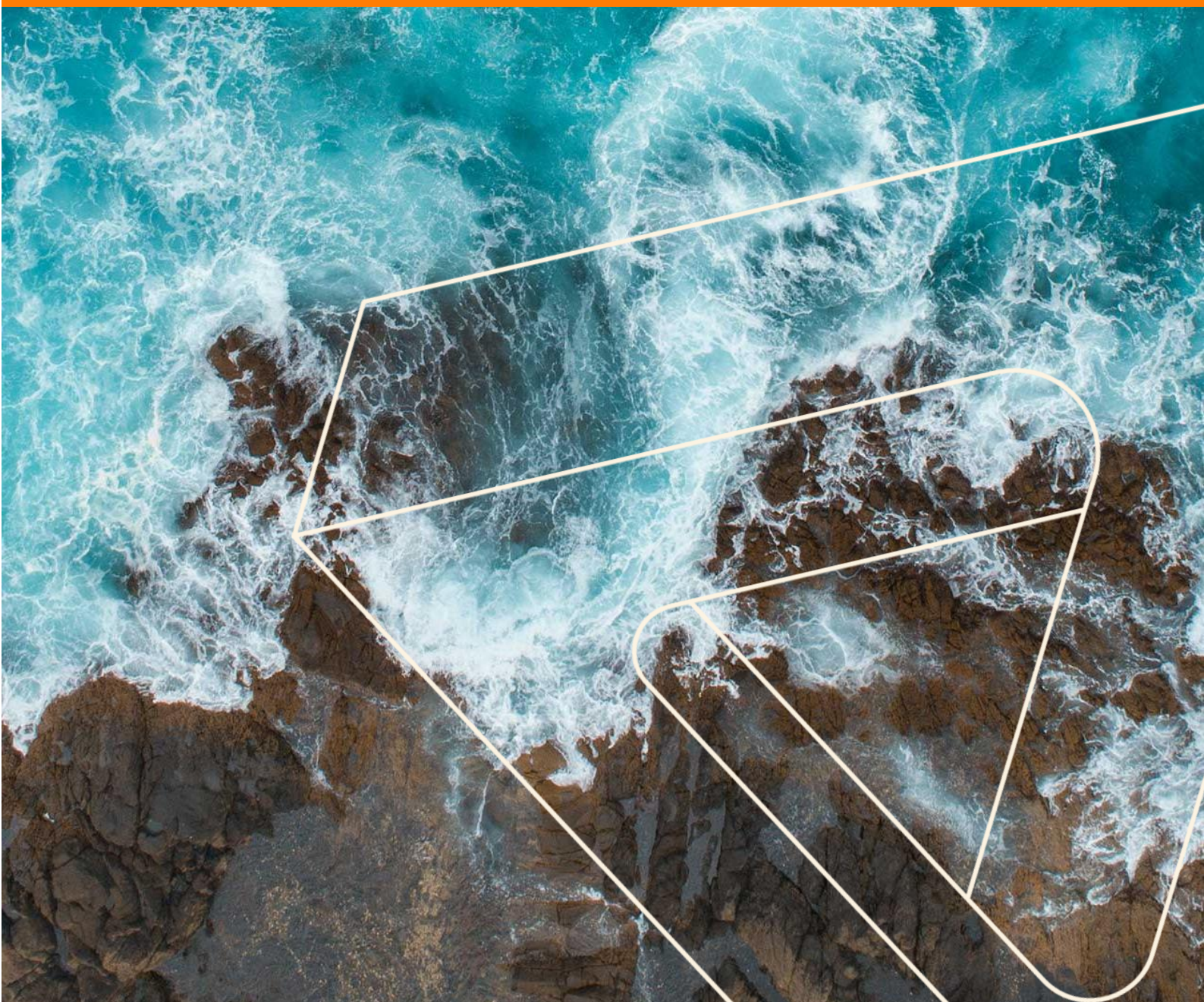
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The value of relationships in managing port risk

How decision-grade evidence helps leading ports create value

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Relationship risk is port risk: How decision-grade evidence helps leading ports see it early

IN SUMMARY

Relationship risk is among a port's least visible risks, and among its most consequential. Evidence that is independent, consistent and tied to decisions helps Boards and executives see it early.

- **It surfaces late.** Weak relationships rarely show in numbers or revenue until a port has little room to respond.
- **Engagement is not evidence.** Account managers and liaison teams hold vital relationships, but what reaches the executive is often filtered.
- **Stakeholders want to be understood, not satisfied.** A port can rarely align every interest, but it can show that it listened before it decided.
- **Trend and comparison turn a score into an early warning.** The Verian Ports Corporate Reputation Index shows whether confidence is growing or slipping, and why.
- **How evidence is collected is part of the relationship.** Method, independence and follow-through shape the trust the research is trying to measure.
- **Managing this risk also creates value.** It protects the confidence that supports investment and helps ports lead.

Where to start: put the five questions for Boards and executives to your next Board or risk committee meeting.

Few organisations work in a stakeholder environment as complex as an Australian port. For more than a decade, Verian has designed customer and stakeholder research for ports and other major infrastructure. Through that work, and through the Verian Ports Corporate Reputation Index, we have spoken with tenants, port users, regulators, industry bodies, communities and government.

What we have learned is that relationships are among a port's least visible risks, and among its most consequential, because the signs of trouble tend to appear late. Strong relationships are a great asset, and independent, decision-grade evidence helps a port understand whether they are as strong as they feel. Managing this risk well is also how ports create value, by protecting the confidence that supports investment and by showing the leadership their stakeholders increasingly look for.

Relationship problems tend to show up late

Ports make decisions that last for decades, and many depend on a small number of large customers. When a key relationship weakens, the signs rarely appear in numbers or revenue until a port has little room to respond, and by then a lease may not be renewed, an investment may stall or a planning approval may be contested.

Most ports invest heavily in relationships through account managers, community liaison and regular meetings, and that work matters enormously. It is not the same as evidence, though. The people closest to a relationship naturally hear most from those who speak up, and what reaches the executive has often been filtered along the way. Candid views can go unspoken to the very people who manage the contract. Boards benefit from an independent read on how customers and stakeholders see the port, one that does not depend on who is loudest or closest.

Stakeholders want to be understood, not satisfied

Ports serve many groups at once. Governments look for growth, regulators for safety and compliance, shipping lines and freight operators for reliability, tenants for the certainty to invest, and communities and environmental groups for their concerns to be taken seriously. These interests rarely align. Container growth can create access and scheduling pressure, new infrastructure can improve long-term capability while raising short-term costs, and expansion that helps some tenants can negatively impact others, such as their neighbours.

In our research, stakeholders often tell us they do not expect a port to satisfy every interest. What they expect is **transparency, genuine engagement and confidence that their view has been understood before a decision is made.** Good evidence helps a port see where interests genuinely conflict, where the conflict is closer to a misunderstanding, and which trade-offs matter most to whom. That gives a port a credible, impartial footing and makes its decisions easier to explain and defend.

Consistent customer concerns make anticipation possible

No two ports are alike. Some have deep channels and plenty of room to grow, while others are tightly constrained. Some serve a wide mix of industries and others depend on a handful of commodities. Even so, the questions customers bring to us are remarkably similar. Can the port support our growth? Is there enough land and capacity? Will it stay affordable? Is it investing for the future, and does it understand where my industry is heading?

Shared concerns mean a port can anticipate what customers are likely to ask, and compare its own position with others, rather than wait to be asked.

Trend and comparison turn a score into an early warning

A single satisfaction score tells a Board relatively little. **It is trend and comparison that give a result meaning.** The Verian Ports Corporate Reputation Index tracks how customers see a port consistently over time and alongside its peers, which shows whether confidence is growing or slipping, and whether a concern is a one-off or something more structural.

One authority responsible for several ports offers a good illustration. Stakeholders saw each port as having its own distinct identity, which created perceptions of inconsistency and uncertainty about future strategic direction. The authority moved to a more centralised identity, and reputation tracking recorded stronger perceptions of engagement quality and competence. It also picked up localised increases in the view that the authority was becoming more bureaucratic and less responsive, which was affecting operations in some locations. Seeing both the benefits and the unintended consequences of centralisation allowed the authority to respond quickly to emerging risks as its strategy evolved.

Seen this way, customer confidence becomes a key risk indicator, and a useful early signal of the renewal and investment decisions still to come.

How you collect evidence is part of the relationship

For many stakeholders, an interview or survey is one of the few structured conversations they have with a port's leadership, so **how it feels shapes how they see the port.** Consultation can be valuable in its own right. A well-run, open process builds goodwill, while a poor one wears it down, for instance when the same people are surveyed repeatedly, asked things the port should already know, or never hear what happened next.

Three choices make the biggest difference:

- **Method.** A senior tenant and a local resident will each get more from a different kind of conversation.
- **Independence.** People tend to speak more candidly to a third party, especially when the subject is the port itself.
- **Closing the loop.** Sharing what you heard and what you plan to do builds trust, even when the honest answer is that something cannot change.

Before commissioning research, it is worth asking what stakeholders will experience, and what they will see afterwards.

What decision-grade evidence looks like

Not all research is built to support a Board decision. In our experience, evidence is decision-grade when it is:

- **Independent and confidential**, so people say what they think.
- **Representative of those who matter most**, with major customers covered fully rather than sampled.
- **Consistent over time**, so results are comparable year on year.
- **Benchmarked**, so a result can be read in context.
- **Explanatory**, showing why views are held and not just what they are.
- **Tied to decisions**, feeding investment, planning and risk cycles.

Not all research is built to support a Board decision. In our experience, evidence is decision-grade when it is: How we have the conversation, is also critical. Most stakeholder conversations begin with familiar issues, and the skill lies in making space to move beyond them to the nuance that builds relationships, without letting that nuance distract from the themes that matter most. It means differentiating between tactical issues, which unlock value now, and strategic ones, which sustain it, and noticing what is emerging before it becomes a problem. Evidence gathered this way does more than describe the past. It helps a port test new ideas against what stakeholders say they will need next, so that investment and initiatives rest on more than assumption.

Questions to ask when writing a brief

- How will you get past the standard answers?
- How will you separate tactical from strategic issues?
- How will you help us see emerging issues early?
- Can you compare our results over time and against peers?
- How will you protect independence and candour?
- How will participants experience the process, and hear back afterwards?

Questions for Boards and executives

1. How would we know if a major customer's confidence were falling?
2. Is the information reaching us come from an independent source?
3. Can we see our results over time and against peers?
4. What do stakeholders experience when we ask for their views?
5. Which decisions in the next three years depend on their support, and what evidence do we have to support these decisions?

Looking ahead

After a decade working with Australian ports, one lesson stands out: relationship risk is port risk, and it is far easier to manage when it can be seen. Regular, independent evidence, built on asking the right questions, and gathered in a way stakeholders value, helps ports spot risk early, respond with confidence and build support for long-term decisions. It also helps them lead, because a port that understands what its stakeholders will need next is better placed to meet it.

A simple place to start is to put the five questions above to your next Board or risk committee meeting. We would be glad to talk about what you find.



CONTACT

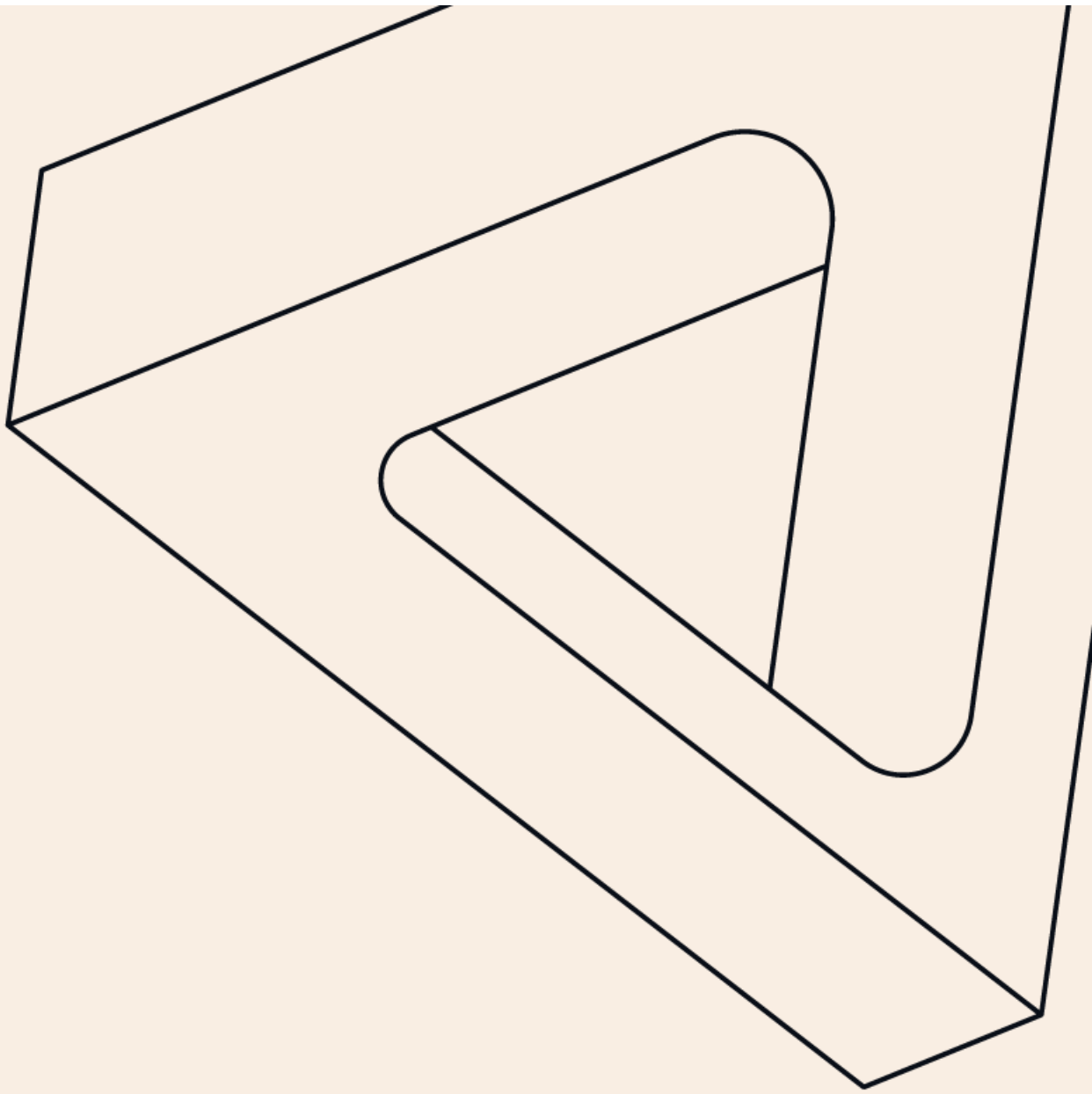
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