

3 Ways to Leverage Powerful Lessons



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“Experience is inevitable. Learning is not.” – Paul J. H. Schoemaker

Have you ever asked a colleague to send you a reminder when a critical deadline or project is looming? Or have you ever added an alarm to your phone to prompt you while you’re developing a new habit? These cues are powerful proddings that help keep us on track, committed, and growing. The risk function at your nonprofit will benefit from similar nudges and reminders. The NRMC team offers these three reminders to help you reflect on this year, prepare for what’s around the corner, and build mission resilience in the process.

1. Prune your policies.

Your nonprofit likely began its life with a meager set of policies, which grew and morphed over time as new issues cropped up. After a staff member showed up wearing an immodest or visually distracting outfit—voilà, a new dress code was born! After two conference attendees behaved badly at the annual gala, a “Code of Conduct” for future events became part of the online registration process.

During the past year, we learned that although it sometimes feels as if policy development takes months and years, changes can actually happen overnight. If there’s a will—or a Gubernatorial order requiring workers to stay home—policies can and do change rapidly. As you gear up for next year, don’t wait until you’re forced by circumstance to update your policies; seize the day to revisit policies with two main goals in mind:

- Strip out verbose language that confuses instead of clarifies, and
- Work in the flexibility all employers and employees need, given the ever-changing landscape in which we must operate.

2. Tear down silos.

Throughout the year, our team met nonprofit colleagues who described being ‘stuck’ in silos. Some of these dedicated professionals were stymied by an unnecessarily formal chain of command requiring ‘permission’ to reach out to a colleague on another team. They yearn to collaborate with colleagues across town, in the building next door, or another department. Innovation and bold thinking emerge from unlikely pairings and circumstances: the convergence of a new challenge with a newfound capability, a spontaneous realization by two colleagues that working together is more efficient than problem-solving alone. These are just two possible positive outcomes of an openly collaborative workplace. As you prepare to move boldly into a year that could be more challenging than the year winding down, resolve to:

- Identify where silos exist that artificially dampen or impede the cross-fertilization of ideas and innovation between teams, and

- Invite staff to volunteer for new teams focused on the top 3 challenges (or top 3 risks) facing your organization next year; resist the lure of appointing or anointing these teams!

3. Get ready and resilient for what's next.

It's not unusual to feel bogged down by what's happening right now. If you feel exhausted by the work you've done to reimagine your facilities, reconfigure schedules, and reengineer delivery models and methods, take a deep breath. You've just gone through a year of intense, aerobic-like exercise. But like aerobics, which are exercises that improve the efficiency of your cardiovascular system, the work you've done this year should be a big step in making your mission more resilient for what's next.

So, what's next? We can't say because we simply don't know! To maximize the resilience muscle and efficiency you've been building all year, examine the practices and activities that enabled your team to be most resilient. Ask:

- What helped most when circumstances beyond our control required us to adapt?
- What practices or weaknesses slowed everything down?
- What gaps were identified this year that remain unfilled?

It's human nature to want to take a deep breath and walk away from the uncertainty and unpleasantness of a challenging year. However, we also know it's not that easy and rarely that uncomplicated. The NRMC team believes that there are inevitable cycles of strain and ease that are very difficult to anticipate or forecast. We do not know what the next interruption or disruptive event or set of circumstances will be. What we *do know* is that many policies developed with benign intent can poorly serve nonprofit missions. Quite often, overly formal structures inhibit innovation that emerges when people feel free to connect with others. And finally, building resilience to weather what's next is the most important risk management goal of all.

In *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World*, Fared Zakaria writes that "In a month, companies changed policies that would normally have taken them years to revise." His words remind us that we often complicate and overthink tasks that could—in the right circumstances—be accomplished quite efficiently. Don't waste the lessons and the sheer experience of the past year. Deploy what you've learned, realized, and discovered to inspire resilience in your team and your mission.

Additional Resources

- [The Best of NRMC's Resilience Resources](#)
- [Does Your Nonprofit Have Resilience DNA?](#)
- [The 7 Deadly Sins of Borrowed Risk Management Policies](#)
- [Lend a Helping Handbook: Employment Policies Worthy of Your Mission](#)
- [Person of Interest: Soliciting Insights from Staff In-the-Know](#)
- [Risk Assessment Perspectives: Re-Lens with Three Approaches](#)
- [Dream Big: 10 Lessons Learned from Skydiving](#)

Melanie Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions about leveraging lessons from the past, potent policy practices, and inspiring resilience at your organization at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.