

# A Spoonful of Skepticism Helps the Medicine Go Down



## By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

**Resource Type:** Risk eNews

**Topic:** Organizational Culture

Have you ever attended a board meeting where one of the members seemed to have everything figured out? Or have you ever worked (or lived with!) a ‘know-it-all?’ One of my favorite expressions relevant to the world of nonprofit governance is, “Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers.” – Voltaire. Although a quick answer may seem efficient, the most creative and durable solutions usually result from healthy dialogue and the patience necessary to ponder probing questions.

In Risk Assessments for our nonprofit clients, there is often an expectation that our team has a repertoire of ready answers to various risk dilemmas and challenges. Many clients ask, “What do other high-performing nonprofits do when they face similar circumstances?” While we take pride in bringing 20+ years of service as risk advisors to every engagement, we often ‘answer’ the questions we receive with additional questions.

The book I’m reading this week offers valuable reminders about the importance of asking questions. In *Managing the Unexpected*, authors Karl E. Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe write that, “The more one knows, the more one realizes the extent of what one does not know.” In Chapter 4, “Reluctance to Simplify,” Weick and Sutcliffe urge leaders to ask probing questions in order to realize the benefit of slowly deconstructing persistent challenges. The chapter cautions readers against the common urge to simplify, such as by adopting simple explanations or solutions to difficult challenges. You can begin practicing a reluctance to simplify by asking the following probing questions:

- To what extent do we take things for granted?
- Is questioning encouraged at all levels within our organization?
- Are all staff and volunteers encouraged to express different views of what is happening? When they do, do we label them as troublemakers?
- Are people shot down when they report information that could interrupt operations?
- Do we listen carefully to each other? Do we frequently—or rarely—dismiss a colleague’s contrary views?
- Do we appreciate skeptics?
- Do staff and volunteers show a great deal of respect for each other, no matter what their status or authority?
- When something unexpected happens, do we spend enough time conducting an analysis of the situation?
- Do we invest in the interpersonal skills of staff, regardless of their rank or position?

While reading *Managing the Unexpected*, I realized that skepticism is fundamental to sound risk management. When we take the time to ask questions about how and why we are facing a particular challenge, we resist the urge to oversimplify and miss the intersecting factors and root causes of the challenge. Weick and Sutcliffe urge

their readers to “Create healthy skepticism and treat skepticism as a form of redundancy.” You can support the resident skeptics at your nonprofit by exploring these tips:

- **Climb Down the Ladder of Inference.** During a recent Risk Summit, an NRMCM staff member presented a workshop on the Ladder of Inference: a thinking process theorized by organizational psychologist Chris Argyris, which leads individuals to make decisions and take action—sometimes with the wrong information. By climbing down the Ladder of Inference and developing greater awareness of how your mind reaches a decision, you can identify points on your ladder where you might be letting bad information or personal biases influence your conclusions. Reassess your thinking patterns and maintain a healthy level of skepticism around your own decisions by watching this [TED-Ed lesson about the Ladder of Inference](#).
- **Empower the Skeptics, Bottoms Up.** Weick and Sutcliffe believe that “Skeptics create alternative frames of reference that increase requisite variety. Unfortunately, diverse views tend to be disproportionately distributed toward the bottom of the organization, which means that those most likely to catch unanticipated warning signals have the least power to persuade others that the signal should be taken seriously.” To empower the skeptics and the people with diverse viewpoints in your nonprofit, go bottoms up by giving frontline staff members an avenue to report their risk concerns to leadership.
- **Try the T-A-S Technique.** During team meetings and discussions, sometimes people tend to be driven by consensus. If a team regularly reaches consensus too quickly, this might be a sign that diverse perspectives are not being explored, or that skepticism is being pushed under the rug. In an [April 27, 2016 RISK eNews article](#), I wrote about a discussion technique I’ve used to quiet too-quick consensus:

“During a recent workshop I taught a class of aspiring risk champions a simple technique to surface views and options that go against the grain. When a proposed solution to a troubling risk was offered, I invited the group to identify the opposite—or antithesis—of that solution. After pondering a few contrary options and possibilities, teams then brainstormed ‘synthesis’ options and solutions. These ‘synthesis’ solutions combined elements from both the original solution and an antithesis solution. The result was an array of strategies worth considering, starting with the ‘thesis,’ continuing with the ‘antithesis,’ and wrapping up with the ‘synthesis.’ This technique, sometimes referred to as T-A-S (thesis-antithesis-synthesis), helps break the stranglehold of consensus thinking. And by identifying the polar opposite—the antithesis of the first idea put forth—you wind up with myriad options and approaches for tackling difficult challenges in unique and inspiring ways.”

Though at first you might prefer a spoonful of sugar to a spoonful of skepticism, the lasting result of skepticism might prove to be much sweeter than that of sugar. Nonprofit leaders or managers should actively invite skepticism and questions from staff members, knowing that “A well-educated mind will always have more questions than answers.” – Helen Keller

*Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your feedback—and skepticism—about this article at [Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org](mailto:Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org) or 703.777.3504.*