Belt and Suspenders: Redundancy in Risk Practice

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"Daring and prudence, when used together, lead to new *and* safe structures." – *Why Buildings Fall Down*

I was reminded of several risk practice fundamentals this week while reading a fascinating book, *Why Buildings Fall Down*. The book chronicles structural failures, including the collapse of dams, bridges, stadiums, and buildings, and focuses on the potential causes of each failure, from lack of redundancy to metal fatigue and even "the law of nature's laziness." The structural and engineering failures described by authors Matthys Levy and Mario Salvadori include the destruction of ancient to modern-day buildings, as well as iconic and lesser-known structures. Despite the dark themes of failure and destruction, I found the lessons on learning from loss both relevant and hopeful.

Risk Reminders from Structural Failures

- **Practice Redundancy** – Levy and Salvadori explain that "Redundancy implies that a structure can carry loads by more than one mechanism—that is, that the forces on it can follow alternate paths to the ground. It guarantees that if one mechanism fails, loads can still be carried by other mechanisms." At NRMC we often coach and train our consulting clients how to practice redundancy, from cross training staff to developing clear written records of risk management strategies. Another oft-cited redundancy in risk practice is developing contingency plans. Randy Park, author of *The Prediction Trap*, urges readers to stop predicting a specific future that they want or expect to occur. Instead, Park describes the need to predict or anticipate multiple possibilities, or multiple futures that you should try to prepare for. Contingency planning and flexibility are key components of any effective risk management program.
- **Respect Nature's Power** – Turning the page back to *Why Buildings Fall Down*, in the chapter titled "Galloping Gertie," the authors describe the failure of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge. Built during WWII, the suspension bridge was known for its long-lasting, undulating motions, "like a string, in a number of different modes," caused by wind. The bridge's collapse followed the twisting of its two halves in opposite directions, something the authors of the book attribute to "the law of nature's laziness." The authors remind us that when there are two paths, "nature *always* chooses the path of least resistance—i.e., the path requiring the minimum amount of energy to achieve the goal." Many risk practitioners are familiar with the 'path of least resistance' in their organizations. Examples include shortcuts through safety protocols, skipping steps in a process, or avoiding difficult colleagues. Recognizing the potential for dangerous shortcuts and explaining the 'why' as well as the 'how' behind your risk policies are key tasks

for any Risk Champion. With a thorough understanding of the mission impact—and with a sense of your empathy about a seemingly burdensome risk protocol—your colleagues will be less likely to resist a risk initiative, and maybe even champion it themselves.

- **Strive for Stretchability** – The authors of *When Buildings Fall Down* describe ductility—the technical term for stretchability—as "the most important measure of resistance to seismic forces." They explain that achieving the highest possible level of ductility is key to designing a structure that will remain standing during an earthquake, while lamenting the fact that "there remains in man a stubborn fatalism that negates experience." In risk practice, the concept of stretchability is key to surviving the negative consequences of an unavoidable risk. In our experience at NRMC, collaborative teams committed to transparency are generally the strongest and most resilient. Ask: how are we ensuring the organizational resiliency needed to bounce back from the unavoidable negative consequences of risk-taking? And after a risk event occurs, don't fall victim to the fatalism or sense of inevitability forewarned by Levy and Salvadori. Risk Champions don't resign themselves to the risk events that their nonprofits face; instead, they actively and earnestly investigate multiple causal factors. Risk Champions also apply John D. Rockefeller's mantra, "I always tried to turn every disaster into an opportunity." A silver lining might be present even in the darkest of disasters.

My dad is well known for his fashion, but not necessarily his fashion sense. He wears the same pants/shirt pairing every day, to simplify the process of getting ready in the morning. Recently he added a 'belt and suspenders' look. Family and friends often comment on his unique post-retirement uniform. Merriam-Webster's definition of 'belt and suspenders' refers to the use of "multiple methods or procedures to achieve a desired result especially out of caution or fear of failure." When I hear the term, I can't help but think of dad's belt and suspenders get-up, as well as the relevance of redundancy in risk management. Employing multiple strategies to better ensure the safe and effective delivery of programs and services also builds the nimbleness needed to change course when 'stuff' happens.

Although disruption and even disaster can't be avoided altogether, risk leadership teams can take steps to ensure that their missions stand up to the powerful forces of nature and humankind. Nonprofits—with armies of passionate stakeholders—arguably have resilience woven into their DNA. Confidence in the face of risk is key to seizing opportunities and requires equal measures of thoughtfulness, planning and vigilance. Levy and Salvadori write: "Today we can be more confident than ever of our designs and hence more innovative, but if wise, we are also perpetually vigilant. This is why almost all of our structures stand up."

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