Fear, Failure and What's Next

By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: General

My colleague Diana Del Bel Belluz recently sent me the link to an episode of the CBC Radio program Tapestry, hosted by Mary Hynes. The episode, titled "To Err is Human" explores a number of subjects, including two of my favorites—failure and fear. The broadcast begins with a conversation between Hynes and Canadian designer Bruce Mau who explains his philosophy of "allowing yourself the fun of failure every day." Mau's lighthearted perspective on failure is a new-to-me twist on the topic. He adds: "Most people are afraid of failure. They have been taught to be afraid of it." Later in the interview he describes "the upside of getting it wrong," and explains that failure is an invaluable asset to artists who shouldn't be "afraid to explore dead ends."

What can nonprofit leaders learn from an artist who embraces the unknown and sees the fun in failure? Perhaps one valuable lesson is that creativity is not the exclusive domain of those who write, paint, sculpt or perform. Creativity is a uniquely human capability that is often sidelined to make room for analytical skills. Bruce Mau's comments about the "inherent" creativity of human beings and the need to tap our creativity are themes explored by Hilary Austen, author of *Artistry Unleashed* and the featured keynote speaker at a past Risk Summit.

"To Err is Human" also features an interview with Brene Brown, author of "The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are," who shares her view that "We get addicted to the idea that if we show the world a perfect version of ourselves we'll somehow be safer." While listening to Brown describe how fear of imperfection stifles human contentment I thought about the intersection of fear and organizational well-being. Brown urges her readers to give themselves "permission to be imperfect" and embrace the complicated nature of being human.

I see a parallel in the fear of imperfection in some nonprofit organizations. Some leaders fear the increasing scrutiny their organizations face as the public's demand for accountability and transparency intensifies. Those who fear the public's interest in what is happening inside a nonprofit may obsess about the risk of a scandal cracking the hard shell of organizational credibility. Denying that there may be problems under the shiny mission statement may cause insiders to bury information rather than make necessary changes. In contrast, it's always gratifying to meet a nonprofit executive who welcomes the scrutiny of a risk assessment, opening up their organizations to a review that might disclose cracks in an organization's structure or management processes. Diagnosing the cracks, weaknesses and other unmanaged risks is the first step to making the organization all that it can be.

Second Acts and Next Steps

I recently re-connected with a former colleague for a long-overdue cup of coffee. After getting over the initial shock of learning that he now drinks decaf, I was delighted to learn that he has embraced his artistic talents. He now relishes his free time and the opportunity to write poetry and ride his Honda Magna motorcycle (but never at the same time).

The topics of *transitions and succession planning* often arise in our consultations with nonprofit organizations. Many leaders at the staff and board levels are beginning to recognize the inherent risks in organizational transitions and the unnecessary jeopardy that results when leaders fail to plan for inevitable transitions. In virtually every risk assessment I've led during the past 20+ years someone on the board or staff has shared their concern about the risk of not planning for the departure of a charismatic leader. Yet far too few organizations have taken the time to plan for these transitions.

In addition, it's not uncommon for long-time executives to feel a bit defensive, if not uncomfortable when the topic of planning for a transition is on the table. Yet planning for leadership changes is not only key to managing in the face of uncertainty, it's the right thing to do. Thankfully there are some terrific resources available to leaders who are uncomfortable talking about "what's next" for the organizations they lead. These resources include:

- Succession Planning for [NOT] the CEO
- Avoid Transition Trauma with a Succession Plan

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions about managing risk in the nonprofit world, feedback on this article and questions about NRMC's resources at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504. NRMC provides risk management tools and resources at www.https://nonprofitrisk.org/ and offers consulting assistance to organizations unwilling to leave their missions to chance. Read about how our training and consulting services make a difference on our testimonials page.