Tell Me a Story

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Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

Simple, clearly written policies represent one way to engage in risk communication. But don't limit your risk communication methods to written policies. In some cases the use of stories may be a better way to share why a risk issue is important, how it relates to mission-fulfillment, and what you expect or require of the listener/receiver.

Why Stories?

You've probably heard that "the best way to teach is through stories." Modern-day storyteller Kathy Hansen offers a wonderful definition of "storyteller" which she attributes to the School of Storytelling at Emerson College in the UK. The following definition of "storyteller" appears on Kathy's blog, "A Storied Career."

A storyteller is more than just a teller of stories. Storytellers are entertainers, teachers and healers with a long spiritual tradition. Their creative work often focuses on strengthening the communities in which they live. Drawing on the richness of the oral tradition, storytellers are bridge builders that connect us to other people, to ourselves, and to the invisible world of the imagination.

If you've been wearing the "Risk Manager" hat in your nonprofit for some time now you may be thinking that the "teacher" label sounds about right. But do you think of yourself as an "entertainer" and "healer"? Let's explore how these roles intersect with the work of a nonprofit leader responsible for risk management.

- **Entertainer** – As anyone who's tried to communicate with a teenager can attest, the first step in communicating an important message is to get the attention of the person you're trying to reach. I've learned this lesson the hard way. Risk communication is about sharing information on risks as well as risk-related strategies. As the champion of sound risk management in your nonprofit, it is vital that the people who need to learn and understand your messages about risk are indeed giving you and your messages the attention they deserve. If you're having trouble getting the attention of an audience you need to reach, consider alternatives to issuing yet another sternly-worded risk "directive."
- **Teacher** – Risk management involves showing as well as telling. As a risk management "faculty member" in your nonprofit one of your goals is to help members of your team–including staff, volunteers and clients—how to proceed with safety in mind. In a youth-serving organization teaching may include demonstrating appropriate touching. In a residential facility teaching may include leading an orderly evacuation. The opportunities to "teach" abound in risk management. Remember the many ways to teach including: by example (your own conduct), by demonstrating a technique, through classroom and

online instruction, and more.

- **Healer** – In organizational life, most, but not all wounds heal with the passage of time and proper care. As the risk management leader in your nonprofit you can help the organization you serve heal from the wounds that result from downside risk by making sure that victims of harm are treated with compassion and that valuable lessons from loss are preserved to strengthen the organization. When a CEO is terminated for failing to meet the board's expectations, the board should reflect on "what went wrong" before it begins the process of recruiting a replacement. Were expectations clear? Were the appropriate screening tools employed? Were warning signs of poor performance addressed or ignored?

Storytelling is a proven way to teach and inspire. Why? Writer Andrea Pitzer offers the following possible explanation: "the most important thing… may be that narrative appears to be the most efficient vehicle for getting people to understand, remember, or accept new information."

Helping personnel in your nonprofit understand, remember or accept new information is vital to effective risk communication. As you reflect on the ways to communicate about risk and persuade others that risk-taking and risk management truly matter to your mission, don't forget that you have a story to tell.

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