

Stop and Think About Inherent Dangers



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Some dangers are so familiar that we don't give them the attention they are due: distracted driving, crossing a busy street, navigating an escalator, or using a ladder. The potential danger of everyday events popped into my head on Monday as I was tumbling off said ladder.

Earlier this week, I finally decided to address the peeling paint on the front of my house. Because I was determined to use the shortest ladder possible (fear of ladders, anyone?), I opted for a step ladder only three feet tall. I placed the ladder on my brick path and ignored the yellow sticker warning me "do not stand" on the top of the ladder. I climbed to the top and started painting super-sticky primer onto my house. Unfortunately, I discovered that one of the ladder legs wasn't on the brick path, but in soft dirt. I tumbled into a prickly bush, bruising my shins and my ego. My clothes and my bushes were splattered with primer, resembling a one-color Jackson Pollack canvas.

Inherent dangers are present in every nonprofit organization. Yet their familiarity may lead us to believe we can manage them intuitively, rather than deliberately. Consider the following tips to better manage the unavoidable inherent dangers while pursuing your mission:

- **Measure twice, cut once:** Ensure that every member of your staff understands to double or even triple check that essential safety equipment is properly in place and in working in order: harnesses, seatbelts, power tools, helmets, and ladders. Even a simple piece of safety equipment such as an eye guard, must be worn properly to do the job.
- **Cavalier means out of here:** Staff or volunteers who mock or disregard safety rules should be shown the door. Provide positive reinforcement by publicly acknowledging people who diligently follow safety rules, particularly when tight budgets and schedules create pressure to take short cuts.
- **Three time's the charm:** Important safety rules should be communicated before an event, referred to while the activity is ongoing, and reviewed in the wake of an injury or near miss.
- **If it's broken, fix it:** Any piece of equipment that protects people from injury should be kept in working order or replaced.

Center Associate Diana Del Bel Belluz of [Risk Wise](#) graciously added the following tips to my list of "must do" items when inherent dangers are in play:

- **An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure:** Make sure that whenever staff or volunteers take on a new role or position in your nonprofit that they are informed of their safety and risk management responsibilities. Don't assume that because someone has been with the organization for a period of time that they know the inherent dangers within their new area of accountability. Make sure they are clear on what inherent dangers to expect, how to recognize them, and who they need to work with to handle them.

- **Stop, look, & listen:** Take the time to scan your organization's environment to look for changes. Are there trends that challenge your existing assumptions about what is safe or acceptable behavior? Are there new patterns in your risk monitoring results that signal new or emerging risks?
- **Listen to your gut:** Explore and confront any circumstances in your existing operations that feel odd or uncomfortable. They could be early warning signs of a looming crisis. Guntram Werther of Temple University asserts that qualitative (rather than quantitative) shifts like the kind we sense in our 'gut' are the earliest signs that a large-scale, large-impact rare event is brewing¹.

It's easy to overlook the familiar. And many inherent dangers are so familiar that we assume we've got them covered. Avoid the inevitable tumbles and injuries that come from taking inherent danger for granted by banishing assumptions and taking a more deliberate approach to safety and risk management.

¹ "Recognizing When Black Swans Aren't: Holistically Training Management to Better Recognize, Assess and Respond to Emerging Extreme Events" by G. Werther, published by Society of Actuaries, 2013

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