

Making My List and Checking It Twice



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Humorist Robert Benchley wrote that, “There are two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don’t.” I’m in the first category. Although I’m intuitively aware of the dangers of oversimplification, from time to time I can’t help myself. In a past RISK eNews I lamented that many community-oriented nonprofit boards attract two types of leaders: *busy people* and *busybodies*. As we approach a season known for list-making, I’ve been thinking about the fact that many people organize their days by moving from one list to the next. Others prefer list-less-ness as a strategy for grocery shopping, party planning and organizational management.

During the holiday break I watched an episode of a competition with what I believe are three essential ingredients for must-see reality T.V.: personality conflict, mouth-watering food, and prize money. The program features a 24 hour battle between two teams who must create and open a “restaurant” in a single day. The program provides each team with an empty room, a commercial kitchen and a budget for restaurant furnishings and food. In this particular episode, one of the “restaurants” quickly ran out of its popular entrees. When queried by a judge about this unfortunate turn of events, the chef admitted that he had failed to make a shopping list and as a result did not purchase enough food. In this case, the lack of a list had dire consequences and the list-less chef left the competition without the prize he coveted.

List-making is an arguably simple but key risk management strategy. Lists help us remember and follow the essential steps in a sequential process. Have you ever tried to install software or assemble a gas grill without following the list of steps?! A short list may be invaluable in an emergency when quick action is required. For example, an evacuation plan described in list form is far better than a dense narrative. At the NRMC we often structure our [consulting services](#) proposals as lists of key steps.

In his thought-provoking book, [The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right](#), author Atul Gawande explores the blessing *and* burdens of knowing too much. He writes that “the volume and complexity of what we know has exceeded our individual ability to deliver its benefits correctly, safely, or reliably.” Gawande’s book explores how the simple device of a checklist can help us translate the extraordinary volume of information and resources we store in our human and electronic storage devices into safer practices. Most of the book’s examples are from the medical field, but while reading about how checklists can help trained doctors and nurses avoid catastrophic medical errors it is not difficult to imagine examples from the world of nonprofit service. Consider using a checklist to:

- Identify the essential items you will need to take to an off-site activity.
- Summarize the action items anticipated or required at your next board meeting.
- Make certain that you have collected key information from victims and observers in the minutes following an accident or near-miss.
- Note the steps personnel must follow in responding to requests for reference checks or media interviews.
- Describe the steps that will be followed in the event of the unplanned or sudden departure of the executive director or board chair.

Checklists aren't the solution to every risk management challenge. They are useless if drafted but forgotten, and simply ticking off items doesn't guarantee safety. But a checklist is among the simplest and least expensive tools at your disposal. I invite you to consider opportunities to put this simple tool to work in your complex environment. You might even want to begin with a list.

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