

Make Patience a Prerequisite



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While visiting my parents in the lovely coastal town of Falmouth, MA, I've observed two distinct types of drivers. The first type of driver pulls onto the main roadway, seemingly unaware (or unconcerned) that drivers with the right of way must brake to avoid a collision. This first type of driver stays close to the car ahead to signal that anyone trying to exit a parking lot onto the main road will have to wait until the line of traffic has cleared. This discourteous driver has but one focus: to prioritize *their* travels, even at the expense or safety of others. The second type of driver offers a cheerful wave or a flash of their headlights to welcome motorists trying to turn right—or left!—onto the main roadway. While accompanying my Mum on errands around town, we amuse ourselves by spotting (and waving back!) to drivers of the second species.

At my first full-time professional job, my boss instilled in me the importance of working with “a sense of urgency.” I discovered ways to look busy, which led me to be busy, from the moment I arrived at work until it was time to pack up for the day. Over the years, I've truly appreciated the “I'll do it now; there's no time like the present!” attitude that NRMC colleagues have brought to our team. But lately, I've been thinking about the counterbalancing benefits of patience and restraint. And I've seen how pausing a risk initiative—after a period of intense focus—can bring new clarity and crispness to the effort.

Time Begets Perspective

Two NRMC clients that have engaged our team to support their evolving [Enterprise Risk Management \(ERM\)](#) programs elected to “pause” their ERM work during the early months of the global pandemic. Since resuming our work together, I've seen that the work we were doing—primarily focused on hypothetical, future risks—now has new urgency *and* relevancy. The pauses, initiated out of necessity to deal with the crisis at hand, had an unintended silver lining! When their ERM work resumed, we found that these client teams were no longer required to divert precious time and attention trying to persuade team members that unexpected, disruptive events can and do happen to well-run nonprofits. Instead, we're doubling down on work that will help each team prepare for unforeseen and surprising circumstances and the readiness and resilience skills and capabilities that are within reach.

When a third ERM client more recently requested a four-month pause in our work together, I could instantly appreciate the wisdom of that decision and look forward to the insights and perspective this recess will beget. As the client team moves through a flurry of activity associated with their return to the office and resumption of shuttered programs, they will experience first-hand how a risk-aware mindset and risk planning activities create options akin to off-ramps, break-down lanes, and rest areas on a busy travel route.

Be Patient by Posing Questions

To infuse priceless patience into your risk management program, develop a list of questions you can pose when things seem wildly chaotic. Below are 20 of my personal favorites.

- Do I really need this today?
- What are the pros of hitting pause? Would the result be better if I paused and returned to finish?
- Whose perspective is missing but attainable if I'm patient?
- If I drop the ball, will it bounce or break? (To evaluate whether the balls you're juggling are 'rubber' or 'glass,' see "[How to Determine if the Balls You're Juggling are Rubber or Glass.](#)")
- Must we sprint, or should we conserve energy for a marathon?
- Do we truly understand the nuances of this risk? Are we possibly thinking about it too simplistically?
- Should we pause to unpack the risk? Ponder its underlying causes or circumstances (going '[upstream](#)')?
- Is my sense of urgency causing unnecessary anxiety in others?
- Am I focused on [the most critical task at hand](#) or putting it off because other tasks are more straightforward? (As Gary Keller writes in *The ONE Thing*, "allow what matters most to drive your day.")
- Is there one thing I could do now that would make other tasks easier or unnecessary?
- Is this a [teachable moment](#) for my team? If I'm patient and bring others in, will the delay be offset by the value of learning?
- Would my patience during this moment potentially inspire positivity in my team?
- Is there an opportunity to learn more and think differently about this issue, project, or puzzle if I'm patient? Could patience free up time to rethink the pathway to resolution?
- What would an optimist say about this challenge? How might an [optimistic risk frame](#) change how we approach the issue?
- Are we approaching this work with [humility](#), acknowledging that we do not have all the answers?
- What assumptions have I made? Why do I think those assumptions are correct? What might happen if I'm wrong?

When you're hard-wired to get things done now and never put off until tomorrow what you can wrap up today, it's hard to be patient! Several years ago, my precocious pre-teen daughter Jessie told me that "impatience" was the root of all the "challenges" in my life. And she explained that my being in a hurry all the time made her anxious. Instead of seeing her diagnosis as impertinent, I took it to heart. Every day since, I pause and remind myself to be more patient. Maybe someday I'll be intuitively patient and won't need the daily reminder. For now, it's advice that's a bit like a great workout; you can't do it once and expect the benefits to last a lifetime.

Melanie Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions about NRMC services and your stories about infusing patience into risk practice at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.