

Normalcy



By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

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When a member of my family questions my somewhat eccentric father about a recent purchase, Dad's standard response is "normal is boring." Family members have learned that there is no point questioning any acquisition—whether it's a vintage motorcycle found on eBay, or a fiberglass sailboat from Craigslist that is in desperate need of repair. I have a hunch that I get my comfort with risk-taking from my Dad's side of the family.

The concept of "normal," like "common sense," has many different meanings. What you view as normal behavior is influenced by past experience as well as your world view. Of course this is true in nonprofit organizations as well. At a workshop I conducted nearly 15 years ago, a participant told me that only convicted felons were eligible to serve as mentors in her nonprofit. Her statement elicited gasps from some attendees. When she explained that the nonprofit's mission included teaching at-risk kids about the downside risks of criminal conduct, the organization's screening criteria suddenly made perfect sense to me.

During a conversation with a client today, I learned about his organization's commitment to exceed minimum requirements and achieve a "best in class" risk management program. With so much focus these days on meeting minimum expectations, I was excited to hear that some sector leaders strive to surpass "normal." With a nod to my Dad, here is my preview of signs that we've eclipsed normalcy.

Signs We Are Doing Better than Normal in 2013

- Complicated voicemail routing schemes will be abandoned in favor of answering the phone and *actually speaking to stakeholders*.
- Enlightened nonprofit leaders will recognize that developing custom-fit policies from scratch (rather than poaching samples off the World Wide Web) offers superior mission and asset protection.
- Staff and volunteers who step forward to express concern or complaints—about issues ranging from agency spending to client supervision—will be thanked for their courage and commitment.
- Nonprofit professionals responsible for buying insurance will disable autopilot, and choose instead to reflect on changing exposures and needs *before* renewing commercial coverage.
- Boards that have put off explaining "how to read nonprofit financial statements" will schedule training to ensure that all board members are in position to exercise fiscal oversight.
- Boards that have resisted changing the format for meetings will abandon the tiresome practice of spending the first several hours reviewing written reports; instead, they will begin each meeting tackling strategic priorities and concerns.

- Boards that have skirted the issue of succession planning will *stop procrastinating* and start developing a practical plan for keeping the mission moving when the CEO departs...for any reason.

Every once in a while it's nice to fit in with the crowd. But, nonprofit missions deserve better than "good enough" risk management. If risk-taking is fundamental to mission advancement in your organization, then you simply cannot afford minimum compliance in 2013. Let's dispense with what has been normal practice for too long. Let's commit to making the changes in policy and practice that will protect our people, our assets, and our opportunities to make a difference in the years to come.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your ideas about any risk management topic, suggestions for best-in-class risk management, and questions about the Center's resources at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504. The Center provides risk management tools and resources at www.nonprofitrisk.org and offers [consulting assistance](#) to organizations unwilling to leave their missions to chance.