

Out of Control



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Being “in control” feels good on a number of levels. When road conditions are optimal and the sky is clear, motoring down a country road can be a joyful experience. Inching along in bumper to bumper traffic with no apparent reason for a back up is enough to try the nerves of even the most forgiving and patient driver.

Last Friday I found myself waiting with a group of frustrated passengers at a small airport. All but one flight to the hub had been cancelled and I could overhear an airline employee explaining that many flights from the hub had also been cancelled due to inhospitable weather. Despite an initial sense of frustration about not being able to return home on schedule, my attitude quickly turned to “que sera sera.” I realized that I was powerless to free up a seat on that final, fully-loaded outbound plane. I concluded that no matter how loudly I complained my vocal protest would not change the path of the oncoming storm. As I stood waiting in line for the details of my new itinerary, I reflected on the importance of focusing attention on *strategy* and *behavior* in the face of uncertainty, rather than obsessing about the challenge of accurately predicting the future.

My colleague Felix Kroman has reminded me on several occasions that risk management is *really* about managing human behavior in the face of uncertainty and its subset, “risk.”

Felix writes:

“Uncertainty is the overwhelming condition in which we live our lives, as individuals and organizations. Risk is a sub-set of uncertainty where we try to measure probabilities based on our knowledge, experience and even wishful thinking.” Risk “doesn’t “happen”: the events or situations described by risk happen or don’t happen.

In his insightful book, [The Prediction Trap](#), author Randy Park explains the difference between *anticipating* and *predicting* the future. He notes that the “goal of trying to predict a single future is asking for failure.” Park writes that “...like predicting the weather, there are tools and approaches you can use to minimize the surprises and allow you to be prepared no matter which future unfolds.” This seems to me to be a more elegant means of being “in control,” at least to the extent that events allow us to be in control.

Anticipating what might happen in the future and developing plans for how we will cope with these events is a way of incorporating the wisdom of both Felix and Randy.

In his article on “summer safety,” my colleague Michael Gurtler explores the need to think about a range of possibilities when gearing up for special summer programming, including the use of outdoor pools and visits to lakes and ponds. Mike’s article is a terrific reminder about the mindset, preparation and due diligence that are required when swimming is offered as a service or activity.

At a business luncheon I attended this week fortune cookies were distributed as an after lunch treat. I found myself staring at the wrapped cookie for a few minutes before opening it. Although I am not superstitious, I was hoping that the “fortune” inside my cookie would be upbeat and reassuring. Many years ago I made a silent vow to resist the urge ever to open another fortune cookie after I received one containing the following message:

“You have made a good start. Now try harder.” As I grappled with the temptation to open this week’s cookie, I recalled the advice of Felix Kloman about focusing on managing behavior in the face of uncertainty rather than managing uncertainty. Sometimes risk management comes in small doses.

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