# This Year: An Odyssey of Your Making




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**Resource Type:** Risk eNews

**Topic:** HR Risk and Employment Practices

Many nonprofit leaders fall asleep dreaming about better times for the organizations they serve. Let's face it, last year was a rough year for the vast majority of organizations that provide vital social services, deliver inspired cultural programs, and conduct research and advocacy to eradicate disease and protect and conserve natural resources and the environment. While so many charitable organizations struggled, an unprecedented number of nonprofits were unable to survive declining public and private support.

I can recall many years when I lamented how quickly the year "flew by." If the events of the past year have challenged your normally sunny disposition and hopeful outlook, I urge you to continue looking ahead.

Several years ago I chose to ignore my advancing years and join my daughter on an ice-skating rink. After a hard fall on the ice I decided to mothball my plans to enjoy the great outdoors and hunker down with a good book. A favorite book that came immediately to mind was *Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart: Thirty True Things You Need to Know Now*, by Gordon Livingston. After that fall on the ice, two of the "thirty things" felt especially meaningful. The first was the statement, "We are what we do." In this section of the book the author explains, "We are always talking about what we want, what we intend. These are dreams and wishes and are of little value in changing our mood. We are not what we think, or what we say, or how we feel. We are what we do."

Reading this section of *Too Soon Old* reminded me that as leaders of nonprofits we must do more than dream about a better future. We must translate those dreams into practical steps that are within reach given our missions, resources, and culture. What single step could your organization take to improve the safety of your "brand," strengthen your approach to financial management, increase accountability by staff and volunteers, or minimize the likelihood of a claim or lawsuit by an injured or disgruntled stakeholder?

In the chapter exploring the relationship between happiness and risk taking Livingston writes, "Something is lost in our obsessive concern with safety and security—some spirit of adventure. Life is a gamble in which we don't get to deal the cards, but are nevertheless obligated to play them to the best of our ability."

I invite you to think about the *risks not taken* in your nonprofit. Ask, what bold risks will we embrace this year to advance our mission?

Many readers are looking back on a difficult year. That makes it hard, but necessary to take a hard look at what we will do this year and next. NCAA football coach Lou Holtz said, "When all is said and done, more is said than

done.” Let’s pledge to say less, and do more. And while you’re thinking about what you will do, why not consider taking at least one bold, calculated risk that will advance the mission of the organization you lead.

*Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your feedback on this article and questions about the NRMC’s resources at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.*