

8 Essential Words



By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

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A few days ago I was reminiscing about the dinner table of my childhood with a close friend. Our conversation about language led me to recall a “word of the day” game that I played with my siblings and parents. Each evening one of the kids was expected to show up at the dinner table with an unfamiliar word. As we passed plates containing protein, starch and vegetables, each family member anxiously awaited the inevitable, always dramatic unveiling. After the kids and then adults tried to guess the definition of the unfamiliar term, the word bearer would reveal its peculiar meaning.

Assuming you have limited funds with which to “buy a vowel” or consign a consonant, what words or phrases are “must haves” in a risk manager’s vocabulary? In a toast to today, here’s my list of eight essential words.

1. **Aware** — Informed, practical risk management begins with being aware. What might go wrong? What could turn out better than we anticipate? What has never happened before... but could? Let’s agree to dispense with exhaustive exercises aimed at “identifying every risk,” and settle on increasing our sense of what’s possible. Simply put, let’s aim to be risk aware.
2. **Alternate** — This one-word alternative to the verbose-sounding “contingency plan” reminds us that escaping dire circumstances often depends on the availability of an alternate escape route. A different way out, around, or through the obstacle or dilemma at hand. Even the best run nonprofits need alternate routes.
3. **Back-up** — This term has different meanings based on how it is used. After your first encounter with the “blue screen of death” on a laptop, you’re likely to hear “when was the last time you backed-up?” from a member of your IT team. “Back up” also refers to the very wise choice of ensuring that no critical task in your nonprofit is owned and understood by a single individual. Let’s face it, stuff happens. We need reliable human *and* data “backups.”
4. **Explicit** — Many years ago I co-authored a booklet on abuse prevention whose title was an explicit statement noting the fact that supervision of young people never includes sex. I was a bit shocked when the client suggested the title. Yet when a recent story of inappropriate and illegal relations between a trusted adult and vulnerable teen was described in a local paper, I recalled the wisdom of that explicit advice. Instead of hiding behind euphemisms for prohibited conduct (e.g., “boundary violations”), today’s nonprofit risk leaders need to recognize when absolutely clear and explicit direction works best.
5. **Practical** — When I counsel nonprofit leaders about strengthening risk management practices I often find myself preaching about the importance of the “practical” method or approach. Lofty ambitions are of little value when you’re trying to guard against harm to mission, human beings and valuable property.
6. **Enforceable** — Policies and procedures that exist in name only are relics of organizational history, not

effective risk management tools. Start pruning your risk management program today in order to lift the huge exposures these policies create.

7. **Truth** — Whether we're advising clients about the best path for defensible reference giving ("truthful, verifiable information only!") or helping a nonprofit leadership team evaluate and re-tool a performance appraisal process, the truth is an *always necessary*, never failing centerpiece of sound risk management.
8. **Compassion** — The discipline of risk management invariably involves policy formulation, staff training, supervision and accountability, record-keeping, and from time to time, accident reports, losses and liability claims. When your risk management program is grounded in compassion—abiding concern for the well-being of all human beings who you serve and who serve—your intuitive responses to unanticipated events, will be the right ones.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your ideas about any risk management topic 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.https://nonprofitrisk.org/](https://nonprofitrisk.org/) and offers [consulting assistance](#) to organizations unwilling to leave their missions to chance.