

Back to School



By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

Across the country countless parents and caregivers have been scrambling in recent weeks to get their young charges ready for another school year. My daughter seems to be one of the few kids returning to school *after* Labor Day, which gave our family a little extra time to obsess about everything that needed to be done before classes begin today. As we pondered the “new” school year, my daughter explained her intent to:

- **Overcome the lure of procrastination**—this year she plans to tackle each night’s homework assignment on the night it is assigned; and
- **Avoid unnecessary penalties**—such as losing points for “forgetting” the essentials, e.g., a gym uniform, P.E. equipment, textbooks, signed permission slips and the like.

Both resolutions were music to my ears! My teenage daughter’s personal resolutions for the new school year reminded me of the resolutions that many adults adopt when it’s time to turn the page to a new calendar or fiscal year. Goal-setting is widely embraced by nonprofit leaders who recognize that establishing ambitious goals is fundamental to achieving mission-advancing results. Rather than waiting for the first of the year, why not start thinking about how your nonprofit will learn from the experience of 2011 and apply those lessons to 2012 and beyond? The following questions are offered as “food for thought” as you ponder a bright and successful 2012 for your nonprofit.

Risk Taking:

- What big, mission-advancing risks did we take in 2011?
- What did we learn from taking risks? If risk-taking did not pay off, what do we know about the reasons? What do we need to know or figure out in order to learn from those experiences?
- What big, mission-advancing risks should we embrace for 2012?

Capabilities, Changes and Resolutions:

- What capabilities, strategies or services seemed out-of-reach or even impossible in the past, but came to fruition in 2011? What does a new list of “impossible” goals or capabilities look like?
- What specific changes did we make in policy, operations or philosophy as a result of lessons learned during the past year?
- What resolutions did we make for 2011? Which of those did we keep? Which resolutions changed or were

abandoned? Why?

- What mission-advancing changes or resolutions should be considered for 2012?
- What are the budgetary/planning implications of our resolutions for next year?
- Have we involved key personnel in planning for changes that will take place in 2012? If not, which points of view have been missing from our planning efforts, and how do we ensure their inclusion?

Handling Complaints:

- How effectively did we handle stakeholder complaints in 2011? What did we learn from the complaints we received?
- What changes in philosophy, process or approach would improve our complaint handling skills and opportunity to learn in 2012? (e.g., removing barriers to complaining, seeing complaints as an opportunity to grow, tracking trends in client/volunteer complaints, etc.)

Peaceful Endings:

- Did any programs or services come to an end in 2011? What program endings are possible or planned for 2012?
- If certain programs, activities or services are likely to conclude in 2012, what steps should we take in advance? For example, what is required to: (1) ensure a smooth transition for service recipients and providers, (2) capture valuable lessons from our experience with those programs, and (3) address stakeholder concerns that may arise?

During a conversation with a friend we concluded that anticipating the future should be a pleasant, happy experience. We should feel good when we think about what the future holds for the organizations we serve. Starting early to anticipate needed and desired changes is one way to increase the opportunity to learn as we grow and evolve, and to ensure smooth transitions and peace of mind.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your ideas about any risk management topic, feedback on this article 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.