

Black, White and Sometimes... Grey



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On Sunday I had the good fortune of visiting The Phillips Collection, a wonderful, too-often-missed museum in the heart of Washington, DC. I was lured by the opportunity to see a special exhibit (“Variations on a Theme”) of the work of Jasper Johns.

Before proceeding to see “Variations on a Theme,” I entered the first gallery space inside the museum, which featured the work of Antony Gormley in an exhibit titled “Drawing Space.” The Gormley exhibit was striking in several respects, but what drew my eye was the contrast of inky black images on stark white paper. As I proceeded to the Johns exhibition on the second floor I was immediately drawn to the monochromatic works featuring the color grey. While Johns is known for his use of color and experimental printmaking techniques, the pieces I found most intriguing were those featuring layers of grey, with images and motifs depicted ever so subtly. As I toured the exhibit and leafed through my newly acquired copy of the Art Institute of Chicago book [Jasper Johns: Gray](#), I learned that Johns has created pieces in a wide range of grey media, including oil and acrylic paint, collage, aluminum, ink, lead and more.

Reflecting on the creative use of grey got me thinking about black, white and grey in the nonprofit world. Many nonprofit leaders either see or struggle to see the issue of “risk” in black and white. These leaders look for definitive “best practices” and policies or strategies that will provide auditable assurance that the organization is crossing every “t” and dotting every “i.” Yet other leaders appreciate the inevitable shades of “grey” in nonprofit life. A “best practice” ideal in one nonprofit context may be unworkable and therefore inadvisable in another. In other cases a practice deemed “best” and therefore appropriate may not stand the test of time. For example, less than a decade ago it was common to find strict policies prohibiting personal use of an organization’s equipment embedded in personnel manuals and technology codes of conduct. Today’s “bring your own device” movement turns that black and white prohibition of “personal use of organization property” upside down.

If you are looking for black and white rules that you can cast in stone or memorialize in ink, many sources are at your disposal. Countless consultants and management texts continue to offer definitive views on “best practices” in risk management. Yet if your nonprofit exists in a world that never ceases to change, and you aspire to hanging on tight and riding the waves of change without getting soaked, you may be better served by seeing your risk management program in shades of grey.

At this year's SUMMIT in Chicago our expert faculty will be exploring the many colors and shades of risk management practice, including the "grey" areas. Brand-new sessions for this year's conference include:

- A workshop on "bring your own device" trend and the associated risks, titled "Call Me" — Personal Devices at Work...Smart Savings or Unacceptable Risk?
- A panel session featured seasoned legal advisors titled "I Am The Law" — Ask the Lawyers; and
- A workshop exploring the complex transactions unique to nonprofits titled "It's All About the Benjamins" — Advanced Accounting Issues for CFOs

I hope you will make time in your busy schedule this August 26-28 to join our team to explore the all too important "grey matter" in the discipline of nonprofit risk management.

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.https://nonprofitrisk.org/](https://nonprofitrisk.org/) and offers [consulting assistance](#) to organizations unwilling to leave their missions to chance.