

Dread Knots



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Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

In his provocative book, [The Courage to Lead](#), R. Brian Stanfield writes: “To be human is to be filled with dread.” By “dread” Stanfield is referring to “a great fear or apprehension.” He reminds his reader that both the fear of dying and the fear of something terrible happening without warning are common. Stanfield adds: “Because we find this dread intolerable we manufacture illusions...we believe, will shield us from the realities of life and protect us from the dread.”

As I read [The Courage to Lead](#) last weekend, it occurred to me that in addition to experiencing apprehension about their own mortality, many nonprofit leaders are apprehensive about the mortality of the organizations they serve. And while dread of organizational mortality may not be productive, recent accounts of nonprofits closing their doors are sobering and worthy of reflection.

We can choose to be like some of the crew and passengers on the maiden voyage of the SS Titanic who sailed under the illusion that the ship was unsinkable, or we can choose to face our “dreads.” Last week I offered a half-dozen simple goals for 2011. Here’s a follow-up list for last week’s **#4: Fight fear**. My suggestion this week is to fight fear and dread less by taking the following steps.

- **Resolve to learn more.** Many fears—including reasonable fears and those that don’t deserve even an ounce of perspiration—can be managed by getting additional information. An unexpected decline in sign-ups, enrollments, sales revenue, or online donations may be due to declining interest in your nonprofit’s mission. Or it may be due to a glitch in your online payments processing software. Or a rumor that your nonprofit is winding down. Before pressing the panic button consider a wide range of possibilities and take the time to take a closer look.
- **Consider alternate futures.** If the facts support the need to change *what* you are doing or *how* you are doing it, consider more than one way to embrace your new reality. Organizational life is rarely akin to a narrow mountain pass—with only one reasonably safe “path forward.” It may be helpful to use a visual aid to guide your thinking. Draw a dot on the left side of a piece of paper representing where you are today (or where you “think” you are). Beneath the dot write a phrase that describes your “today.” Next, draw several dots representing possible tomorrows on the right side of the page, (e.g., top, middle, bottom of the right side of the page). “Connect the dots” from today to possible tomorrows with arrows. Now brainstorm possibilities for your “tomorrows.” In a matter of minutes you can conceive scenarios that look brighter than today. Being open to a range of possibilities is the first step.
- **Dispense with illusions.** Ambitious plans for the future, dreams of meeting the needs of your community and “stretch” goals can motivate the leaders of a nonprofit. But illusions can mask rather

than help you overcome or unknot dread. Consider dispensing with unhealthy illusions during 2011.

Candidates for the “dispensary” include:

- Your illusion that poor performing staff will eventually “come around” and begin performing at or above your requirements.
- Your illusion that conflict between the board and executive will “resolve itself...eventually.”
- Your illusion that ignoring plant and equipment maintenance is a logical cost-savings measure.
- Your illusion that skimping on staff training for “one more year” doesn’t put your mission, reputation and clients at risk.
- Your illusion that many of the downside risks you face won’t materialize and you’ll probably be lucky enough to dodge those that land.

As you work this year to fight fear and turn dread into proactive risk management, don’t hesitate to reach out the team at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center for assistance. We can help in a number of ways, from helping you draft or revise [risk management policies](#) to designing [custom training programs](#) (on-site, virtual/webinar, or online). We also offer free technical assistance as well as affordable and easy to use online tools, such as [My Risk Management Policies](#) and [My Financial Management Plan](#).

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