Dream a Little Dream With Me: Channeling Chaos



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The word chaos has myriad negative connotations: confusion, disruption, frustration. Many risk leaders expect that evolving risk management capabilities will bring order, formality, and cadence. My team fields question after question about managing risk more effectively; no one has ever asked us to help a risk team create disorder from order or replace sense-making with confusion. This week while finishing *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation* by Steven Johnson, I began to understand the fertile nature of chaotic thoughts.

In Chapter IV – *Serendipity*, Johnson explores how chaos is essential to coming up with new ideas. He writes, "The phase-lock mode (the theory goes) is where the brain executes an established plan or habit. The chaos mode is where the brain assimilates new information, explores strategies for responding to a changed situation. In this sense, the chaos mode is a kind of background dreaming: a wash of noise that makes new connections possible. Even in our waking hours, it turns out, our brains gravitate toward the noise and chaos of dreams, 55 milliseconds at a time."

I want to challenge you to look at 'chaos' in a new light and explore confusion as a source of inspiration! Read on to consider three approaches to embracing the possibility of discord and disorganization.

Listen to the Noise

Does your team ever feel overwhelmed by confusing or perplexing circumstances? Or perhaps it's the convergence of untimely or unfortunate events that confounds your best intentions? If you want to find inspiration (instead of exasperation) in chaos, try the following question prompts:

- What aspects or elements of the current state do we believe we truly understand?
- Are we making assumptions about what we know? What if we're wrong?
- What is still confusing or perplexing about the situation? What are the unknowns?
- What actions could we take to better grasp or make sense of the confusing elements? (the knowable unknowns)
- What aspects of our current state are most intriguing?
- How could we use this time to tap into an opportunity in the middle of chaos?

Ideas and Inspiration: Recycle and Reuse

One of the techniques that our team routinely uses is revisiting ideas we have set aside. During brainstorming sessions—with consulting clients, Affiliate Members, and staff meetings—seeds of inspiration emerge; some (sometimes all!) are invariably discarded. Often, pressing priorities fill the discussion space, or an idea isn't ready to be cultivated. I love it when our conversations veer back to "remember that idea we talked about…" and the season is right to tend to that idea and help it grow and develop into something new. Johnson writes, "Good ideas are not conjured out of thin air; they are built out of a collection of existing parts, the composition of which expands (and, occasionally, contracts) over time."

To find inspiration in discarded ideas or 'spare parts,' try the following question prompts:

- What interesting ideas have been raised and discarded?
- What initiatives or problem-solving strategies were abandoned too soon?
- What aspects of our environment have changed (and how) so something once deemed impractical just might work now?
- Can we combine parts of a discarded idea with a tried-and-true method to reinvigorate it?

Dream It, Build It

This time of year is alive with abundant opportunity to imagine what next year's work will look like for the NRMC team. The annual budgeting process forces us to make predictions and forecasts about how our client work, Affiliate Member program, and schedule of educational programs will come together. We always have hopes about how things will turn out, but the unknowns and possibilities loom larger than the knowns. For me, the anticipation of who our clients will be, and which nonprofits will join us as brand-new members make dreaming next year fun and invigorating.

As you prepare for a new calendar year, I encourage you to reflect on:

- Your dreams – what do you wish will happen to your organization, your team, and your risk management program next year?
- The great unknowns – what do you hope to explore, learn, and discover next year?
- Your inspiration – where will you look for inspiration to fuel the ideas and actions that will bring a bit more chaos and imagination?

When using these question prompts, resist the urge to order the chaos that ensues from ideas flying fast and furious. Gather and welcome them all in a messy accumulation. The act of collecting new thoughts without the pretense or the rigidity of order will push your team to look at challenges and opportunities with fresh eyes. Cluttered chaos is a worthy risk when the reward is innovation and mission success.

Melanie Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions about reinvigorating risk practices and your stories about channeling chaos and unrestrained ideas at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.