

Celebrate Spring with Surprise



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Enjoy the little things in life, because one day you will look back, and realize they were the big things. – Kurt Vonnegut

This Spring has been extra special, with news from several colleagues that little ones have arrived or are en route. I recently had the opportunity to meet the tiny tots my daughter tends to during her free time between college classes. To cheer up the grumpier of the two boys, I attempted a quick game of peek-a-boo. As I revealed my face and uttered the words “peek-a-boo!” it occurred to me that peek-a-boo may be passé. Not so. Little Maxwell’s expression immediately changed from grim to gleeful.

With my faith in the power of peek-a-boo restored, I wondered how many years would pass before Maxwell would start to fret, rather than fancy, surprise? When do humans stop welcoming and start shirking from surprise? And at what point in our development does surprise get such a bad rap?

In their book [*Surprise: Embrace the Unpredictable and Engineer the Unexpected*](#), authors Tania Luna and LeeAnn Renninger explore the science behind surprise. According to Luna and Renninger, we experience surprise in four stages:

- Freeze: our initial response to the unexpected
- Find: we want to know what’s happening and why it happened
- Shift: we try to reconcile our assumptions with new information
- Share: we’re drawn to share our surprises with others

In spite of the stages, *how* we experience surprise isn’t pre-ordained. For example, by resisting the lure of assumptions or easy answers to the “what,” “how,” and “why,” questions about something that has happened, we’re primed to learn and update our perspective. We’ve seen this at NRMC in clients that have embraced root cause analysis as a technique for developing a truer understanding of the reasons—human as well as systemic—for a loss or near miss.

And finding ways to cope with negative surprises—by looking for the inevitable silver linings and lessons—is more productive than trying to avoid them. When our team teaches the “Risk Bow Tie” risk assessment technique, we ask participants to create a list of *possible upsides* of any downside risk they identify, and then ask attendees to list some of the *potential downsides* of welcome risks. Although our first inclination is to see risks as either positive or negative, the exercise illustrates that dreaded as well as delightful risk events are

never just one note.

Risk avoidance sometimes stems from fear: we fret about appearing foolish and worry about making costly mistakes. But playing it safe and avoiding surprises stanches growth and learning. The advice we give our wee ones—that it's ok to stumble as long as you get back up and try again—turns out to be sound advice for grown-up nonprofit leaders too.

Luna and Renninger invite us to look for opportunities to increase the number and variety of surprises we experience in our personal and professional lives to “inspire wonder, connection, vulnerability, growth and creativity.” This mindset, when effectively applied, can craft a far more productive and even passionate environment in a mission-driven organization.

One of the most potent effects of surprise is distraction. When we're startled, we loosen our grip on whatever we were obsessing about minutes earlier. Doing so results in a loss of control over the situation and a step back from immediacy, allowing us to assess things from a broader perspective. This can be equal parts freeing and terrifying: the realization, as Luna and Renninger put it, is that we're not just out of the driver's seat; we're not even in the car.



This response is often painted in a negative light, as it diverts the pre-established “plan” we have for the way things should go. It's disruptive, and at times uncomfortable, to acknowledge the place where your control ends and unpredictability begins, but leaning into this discomfort is one of the most valuable risks an organization can take. Not only does it take some of the pressure off your shoulders, it allows you to be better prepared for the extraordinary.

All this is not to discredit the importance of planning ahead, however. Envisioning a path to achieve your nonprofit's mission is responsible, practical, and vital. But remember that your intended path is only an outline of your eventual journey, and there are no bumpers to prevent life's ‘gutter balls’. Surprises are inevitable, and welcoming them with whimsy rather than dread will make your organization a more rewarding, exciting, and ultimately more interesting place to serve.

In short, the phrase “spontaneity is the spice of life” applies to more than playing peek-a-boo or trying a new ice cream flavor: it can be a valuable mantra for nonprofits, to practice in the day-to-day. In the end, it's not your job to predict the unpredictable, but to embrace it.

Resources:

“[Why Humans Need Surprise](#),” by Jill Suttie, *Greater Good Magazine*, The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley

Luna, Tania, and LeeAnn Renninger. *Surprise*. Penguin Random House, 2015.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She would like to thank Jules, a new intern at NRMC, for her contributions to this piece. Melanie welcomes your thoughts about spontaneity and unpredictability at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.