# Choose Essential: Define Your Singular Risk Priority




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This week I've been reading *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less* by Greg McKeown. The book's themes touch on a prickly subject for me: saying "no." A very wise friend once told me that we often say yes out of fear that if we say no, we won't get asked again. Rarely is that the case.

I attended a meeting this week with a large team that was trying to assess the risk that a slate of new initiatives might overwhelm key functions and departments. Often, we are drawn to 'doing more' to usher forward the 'good.' However, when the sheer volume of initiatives begin to outweigh the benefits they produce, many nonprofit teams are left feeling a sense of dread. I sense that many risk champions and professionals feel overwhelmed by a weighty to-do list, multiple—sometimes competing—priorities, and a sense of trying to go in many directions.

This observation made one of my first "ah-ha" moments from McKeown's book especially profound. The author explained the origin of the word **priority**. He writes:

> "The word priority came into the English language in the 1400s. It was singular. It meant the very first or prior thing. It stayed singular for the next five hundred years. Only in the 1900s did we pluralize the term and start talking about priorities. Illogically, we reasoned that by changing the word we could bend reality. Somehow we would now be able to have multiple "first" things."

Many nonprofit teams adopt multiple "strategic priorities" (note the plurality!). Risk teams often begin their work by compiling a run-on list of risks in a format called the Risk Register. Imagine the potential for focus and impact if we were to adopt a single, true priority? What **IS** the **most important priority** of your risk management department, function, or team? To borrow from Gary Keller, author of *The ONE Thing*, what is the one thing your risk team could do that would make everything else easier or unnecessary? What is the essential goal you're trying to achieve? If your risk function were on fire, what's the one thing you would clutch as you're running away from the flames?

## Too Much = Decision Fatigue

McKeown reminds us that when there are too many options, decision fatigue quickly sets in. The creators of a popular time and productivity tracking tool, RescueTime, define decision fatigue as simply “the deterioration of our ability to make good decisions after a long session of decision making.”

When nonprofit leaders stretch staff too thinly with many priorities to ‘do more’ for the mission, teams experience exhaustion trying to juggle all the decisions necessary to keep every ball successfully in the air. When this happens, productivity plummets and progress, programs, and the important work of the nonprofit suffer.

How do teams combat decision fatigue?

1. **Simplify!** The first step is to reduce the number of decisions required. Steve Jobs defaulted to a “uniform” of a black turtleneck and blue jeans to free up decision-making space for innovation and ideas. Pick your battles; for your nonprofit’s risk function, your ‘uniform’ should be the single most impactful priority!
2. **Schedule the most important thing first.** Many productivity books and gurus will tell you that when you focus on the most challenging thing first, you have the most mental capacity to allocate to that project. So, dive right into that *one thing* first thing in the day.
3. **Recognize the need to rest.** When you notice fatigue setting in, take note; this means it’s time for a break—table conversations and decisions for a time when the team has had a chance to step away. Even if you have to reconvene the next day, don’t try to push for resolutions when people on the team begin to feel numb or overwhelmed.

## Know When to Say ‘No’

In *Essentialism*, McKeown writes, “The way of the Essentialist isn’t about setting New Year’s resolutions to say ‘no’ more, or about pruning your in-box, or about mastering some new strategy in time management. It is about constantly pausing to ask, ‘Am I investing in the right activities?’” If you’ve ever felt—even for a moment—that your risk function is like a hamster on a wheel, know that it’s possible to get off the wheel and put it away forever.

By distinguishing the essential work from the noise, nonprofit leaders can make more informed decisions about when to say no and where to focus resources for the most impact. The critical element is the pause. However brief, the pause to consider if activities, programs, and opportunities are serving the mission presents a quiet space to focus on what is truly essential.

## Risk Priorities Worth Fighting For

The following are examples of singular risk priorities that could galvanize a team and bring focus to everything else you’re trying to accomplish in your risk function. Choose one—or better yet—craft your own to define your team’s singular risk priority for this year.

- Bringing a risk-aware lens to every important decision we make this year.
- Inspiring confidence to enable us to take *the big risk* that will advance our mission.
- Elevating risk management from a function that lives in silos to one that soars over our mission and reveals the intersections of goals and risk on our horizon.
- Training the entire team to engage in candid, timely conversations about the risks we take and risks we face.
- Choosing an insurance advisor (agent or broker) who works as a true mission partner and supports our work year-round.

Once you identify your singular priority, continue working with your risk team to define the WHAT (steps, strategies, and activities), the WHO (make sure you’re benefitting from diverse points of view instead of tackling challenges using a singular, narrow lens), and the WHEN (choose ambitious but reasonable deadlines for milestones to measure if you’re on track). By focusing on one significant, essential thing your nonprofit team can cut through the clutter and capably move on the path to achieving something meaningful that truly matters to your mission.

**For additional insights on prioritizing, paring back, and defining key objectives in your risk function, see these NRMC articles:**

- Toss Your To-Do List
- Toss the Register, Make a Plan Instead
- To Infinity and Beyond: Unleashing Imagination to Build Your Organization's Resilience
- Question Everything
- Everything's Coming Up Weeds

*Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Contact Melanie with questions about risk, or to share how you're paring down a long to-do list to discover your singular risk priority. She welcomes your feedback about essentialism, leadership, and the wide world of risk at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.*