

Chunk Change: Ask for Less to Get More



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I've just finished reading Jonah Berger's book, *The Catalyst: How to Change Anyone's Mind*. Two compelling takeaways were Berger's suggestions that leaders 1. Ask for less to get more, and 2. Break big asks into smaller, more manageable 'chunks.'

He offers the following advice for anyone having a difficult time persuading someone to think or do differently:

"Try asking for less rather than pushing for more. Dial down the size of the initial request so that it falls within the zone of acceptance. Not only will that make that initial request more successful, it also makes big change more likely overall."

According to Berger, 'big changes' are often slow, steady shifts in disguise. Has your organization announced a big change this year? Did the change happen overnight, or was it the result of many steps, missteps, twists, and turns leading you to the results or present environment? Berger's book reminded me that even when the environment feels new, successful transformations often happen when a team is allowed to grow accustomed to smaller changes one chunk at a time.

Berger explains: "But look closer at big changes, and they're rarely that abrupt. Instead, they're often more of a process. A slow and steady shift with many stages along the way. Rather than just asking for less, then, it's really about *chunking* the change. Breaking big asks into smaller, more manageable chunks. Starting with one and building from there."

Relevance for Risk Practice

How might asking for less and breaking big asks into chunks help a risk leader working to transform risk management in a nonprofit? Here are a few thoughts from the NRMCM team.

1. **Prioritize simple steps over fancy frameworks.** My team recently responded to an ERM client's request for a 'decision tree' to show how a risk makes its way through the risk assessment and analysis steps we've been describing. Initially, we were focused on creating a pretty and compelling ERM Framework, a deliverable most clients crave. The client's request for a decision tree diagram reminded us that a fancy framework is potentially useless if team members don't know what to do when a 'what if' pops up in conversation. The process of creating a decision tree for risk was one way to 'chunk' a new approach into manageable bites and steps.

2. **Convene a workshop before unveiling a training plan.** With another ERM client, we recently suggested convening a risk-themed workshop with a small group before developing a plan to ‘roll out’ ERM training across the organization. During the training debrief, we learned that the team appreciated the opportunity to ponder risks impacting their focus areas and that some aspects of the workshop were quickly understood and completed. But other pieces of the planned workshop fell flat. Good to know! Had we rushed to complete a comprehensive training plan without first testing a simple workshop, our collective efforts would have been a regretful waste of resources. Armed with insights from the first training, we can iterate and design a second version to test with a different group at the same organization.
3. **Introduce policy concepts and tentative plans before announcing any dramatic change in practice or expectations.** During the past year, I’ve read and discussed a handful of ‘return to the office’ strategies and plans with [Affiliate Members](#) and [consulting clients](#). A common theme in these conversations is the message that leaders are working hard to iron out the kinks in the plan before unveiling it at a staff all-hands or town hall meeting. I’ve encouraged everyone sharing that strategy to discuss tentative plans with as many team members as possible versus keeping everyone in suspense. Find out how people feel about the approach you’re considering, rather than waiting for the reaction when all decisions have been made. The latter is a recipe for disappointment instead of success. Your goal should be to reaffirm evolving expectations about the changing environment instead of springing a bad surprise on the team.

Portion Control Performs

I’ve always been a fan of the big crazy, ambitious goals for which nonprofits across our sector are known. When I discover that a nonprofit client of ours is determined to end chronic homelessness or ‘safeguard the earth,’ I am inspired to want to join the effort and help in any way I possibly can.

Yet within an organization—even one with an inspiring, ambitious mission—there are many ‘chunks’ of effort and small steps that must be made in the journey. This same truth extends to an organization hoping to modernize risk practice or evolve to an integrated approach, the hallmark of Enterprise Risk Management. As you focus on building risk-aware leaders at all levels of your organization and inspiring your team to embrace the risks necessary to achieve your grand vision, remember that tackling manageable-sized chunks helps teams stay engaged, see progress, and make essential course corrections when results don’t pan out as expected.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is the Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your comments and stories about creating manageable ‘chunks’ and dialing back the demands on a nonprofit team to achieve impressive, lasting improvements in risk management. Melanie can be reached at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.