

Clear the Decks



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Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

December 31, 2015

According to www.english-for-students.com, the expression “clear the decks” refers to the preparations made by the crew of a sailing ship, such as removing or fastening down loose objects on deck “that might otherwise get in the way of the guns, or be knocked down and injure a sailor.” Although I’m optimistic that 2016 will be a year of success and progress for our clients, some readers may be anticipating a skirmish or dustup, if not a full-on battle.

Whether you’re planning to resuscitate or reinvigorate your mission or your risk management program next year, today is the perfect day to “clear the decks.” How? Get ready to conquer your list of New Year’s resolutions by pausing and celebrating what you learned in 2015.

Here are a few ideas to jog your memory about the difficult but valuable lessons from the year that is almost over.

- **Give yourself a break.** The departure of a valued staff member earlier this year led to unproductive worry followed by a mad dash to recruit and hire a replacement. Did you also experience feelings of guilt or regret? Where did I go wrong? Why is he leaving us now? How will we ever fill those shoes? But now that the storm has passed, it’s time to realize that staff turnover is an opportunity to learn and grow. Too many leaders hurry to fill staff vacancies as if they were holes in the floor of a rickety rowboat adrift at sea. The hard truth is that your nonprofit won’t capsize if you take your time to re-evaluate each newly vacated position. Always pause before filling key roles, regardless of whether the newly departed employee was a deeply valued team member or the biggest hiring mistake you’ve ever made.
- **Celebrate the time well-spent in staff meetings.** My team frequently hears complaints about the lack of staff meetings in our client organizations. The source of these complaints is never the leader; the nonprofit’s rank and file staff complain because they feel undervalued, excluded and out of the loop. Regular staff meetings provide a wonderful opportunity: 1. to learn what others are working on and, 2. to surface challenges that require two or more brains or sets of hands. If the meetings you run are boring or counter-productive, look in the closest mirror for the cause. Did you involve every member of the team in selecting agenda topics? Did everyone have a role to play or did you call people to the conference room simply to have an audience? Staff meetings aren’t a waste of precious time; meetings are the place where problems are solved, alliances are formed and strengthened, and wisdom, insights and victories are shared and celebrated.
- **Purge and prepare.** Getting rid of things we don’t need can be hard, even for seasoned nonprofit

leaders and neat freaks. Yet the truth is we all need less stuff than we think we do. Duplicate or draft copies of last year's budget, brochures from long-past conferences, and coffee-stained articles we will never have time to read are just a few of the items that clutter our physical and virtual workspaces. Give yourself permission to discard a few stacks of guilt-inducing paperwork and a few thousand dated emails to make room for the wonderful new insights and inspiration that will land on your desk and in your inbox in 2016. As the calendar year draws to a close, stop rushing around and take a few minutes to pause and reflect. The new year is one of promise and opportunity. But you need to be fully ready and clear-headed for the bounty and inevitable challenges to come.

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