

Risk Leadership Life Hacks



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A Google search for the term “life hacks” returns 318 million results. That’s a lot of advice on efficiency whirling around the web! These days, everyone is interested in how to do things better, maximize precious time and resources, and bolster personal and professional efficiency. I recently listened as a leader from an international nonprofit described how his team considered a variety of templates for tracking evidence of compliance with organizational policy. A logical plan, take a good look around before adopting another organization’s approach as your own! However, the justification for the selected template perplexed me: “We opted for the most complicated template.” Say that again?

That conversation made me briefly question my instinct to strip unnecessary or confusing steps and words out of risk processes, policies, and procedures. Complexity doesn’t necessarily translate into thorough and effective. I prefer a simple risk dashboard over a long-winded dissertation.

In “[The Greatest Life Hacks of All Time \(for Now\)](#),” New York Times opinion columnist David Brooks presents “priceless life hacks to help you float effortlessly through the miasma of modern existence.” The article, a compilation of efficiency mottos, allows readers to learn from the lessons of others and choose what resonates. Brooks reminds us that, “These are the kind of bits of golden wisdom that get earned over decades of experience but that can be shared for free.” From the list of 30+ life hacks in the article, I’ve chosen five favorites to share below. The bold text is mine.

- **Expect (and Receive) the Best.** “Getting cheated occasionally is a small price to pay for trusting the best in everyone, because when you trust the best in others, they will treat you the best.”
- **Be Self Aware, Not Self Absorbed.** “Ignore what they are thinking of you because they are not thinking of you.”
- **Take Notes.** “The biggest lie we tell ourselves is, ‘I don’t need to write this down because I will remember it.’”
- **Embrace risk.** “If you’re giving a speech, be vulnerable. Fall on the audience members and let them catch you. They will.”
- **Focus on the midterm.** “Don’t try to figure out what your life is about. It’s too big a question. Just figure out what the next three years are about.”

Risk Function Hacks

The NRMC team has observed that risk functions are more likely to become ‘baked in’ at organizations that opt

for streamlined processes and efforts that don't create additional complications. Try one or more of the 'hacks' below to bolster the efficiency of your risk management function.

[Stop trying to identify a litany of risks.](#) Focus on the top 3-5 risks that potentially threaten—or bolster—your strategic priorities and mission.

[Identify and vanquish the thieves of your valuable attention.](#) In their book *See Sooner, Act Faster: How Vigilant Leaders Thrive in an Era of Digital Turbulence*, George S. Day and Paul J.H. Schoemaker write, "Collective attention can easily be subverted, however, by such organizational maladies as tunnel vision, short-termism, strategic gaming, and wishful thinking."

[Make doubt acceptable and prepare to be surprised.](#) The dynamic backdrops or landscapes in which nonprofits operate must inspire us to voice and reflect on our doubts. Too many leaders (or aspiring leaders) believe the only acceptable posture is confidence. Don't confuse [optimism with confidence](#). Humility is vital to successful risk leadership. You don't know what disruption is around the corner; the only thing you can be certain of is that you will be surprised this year, next year, and so on.

Your risk (or ERM) framework isn't a tattoo. **[Draw it, use it, and adjust.](#)** Repeat. Some organizations falter when it comes to operationalizing a risk or ERM function. One common reason is the inclination to have a "final" process in place before sharing it widely with the team. Don't be afraid to iterate! Rarely will any risk champion devise the perfect process that requires no adjustments. Go ahead and experiment! Take the lessons you learned and continue to adjust to best suit your organization's culture and mission.

Wait your turn. **[Hear and understand what others on the team think](#)** before expressing your (highest paid person's) opinion. Leaders who pause to listen first might discover fascinating perspectives in addition to fostering a team who feels empowered to speak up! Diversity fosters great innovation.

[Always tell the truth.](#) My wise, ethical, always inspiring Dad reminded my siblings and me that when you lie, you waste time and energy keeping track of your lies. Truth fosters trust and integrity. Your mission cannot survive without them.

The bottom line? The risk function at your nonprofit should be an asset. It helps uncomplicate decision-making, ensures that team members know what to do when things don't go as planned, and allows staff to talk freely about concerns and exciting opportunities. There's nothing wrong with doing a bit of 'hacking' to your processes and trying out some simpler solutions! Try a few of these life hacks and give yourself and your team the grace and permission to keep iterating until you find the perfect fit.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions, tips, and hacks for creating a more efficient risk function at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703-777-3504.