

# Embrace Your Leaky Brain to Conquer the Unknown



## By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

**Resource Type:** Risk eNews

**Topic:** General

This week I was dismayed to learn about the damaging effects and destructive force of a leaky faucet. For the past two weeks I have noticed—but repeatedly ignored—a strangely stiff faucet handle and minor leak in one of my sinks at home. Now it's time to pay the piper, or in this case, the plumber, for my ignorance and neglect. I've learned a difficult and expensive lesson about the importance of paying close attention to things that are out of place in one's environment.

But thankfully, in addition to learning the costly consequences of ignoring a leaky faucet, I've also learned that a leaky sensory filter—a brain that easily picks up sensory cues in the environment—can be invaluable when it comes to coping creatively with uncertainty. In the chapter titled “Openness to Experience,” in the book *Wired to Create* by Scott Barry Kaufman and Carolyn Gregoire, the authors explain that psychological plasticity enables us to engage flexibly with the unfamiliar. I've picked up a few additional, simple tips from *Wired to Create* that you might find useful as a Risk Champion charged with understanding uncertainties that threaten to either boost or unravel your nonprofit's mission.

- **Embrace your distractibility** – Did you know that distractibility—being easily distracted—is beneficial to creative work? If you've ever been frustrated by a conversation in the next cubicle or the soft music coming from a co-worker's device, you're not necessarily an ogre. You might instead be a creative soul. Creative teammates who seem hypersensitive to noise and light are better able to notice and appreciate the subtleties in their environment. This hypersensitivity increases the odds of connecting mildly related data points.
- **Rustle your routine** – According to Kaufman and Gregoire, one can cultivate a creative mind-set without incurring great expense or physical risk. The authors remind their readers that simple changes—such as taking a new route home, sitting in a different chair at the conference table, or socializing with someone who has different interests than you—can boost creativity.
- **Don't hire yourself** – A common mistake often unwittingly (or dim wittingly) made by managers is to hire people who seem familiar. Nonprofit missions reap valuable rewards when new team members with varied backgrounds join the conversation. If you've ever served on or reported to a board consisting entirely of long-standing members, you've probably experienced the frustration of convention and unwarranted fear of uncertainty.
- **Strive for integrative complexity** – The authors of *Wired to Create* write that “The greatest innovations can occur when the wisdom of one discipline is brought into another, seemingly unrelated

one.” Invite team members from various disciplines and functions at your nonprofit into every conversation about risk; a common and dangerous mistake is to isolate risk responsibility in finance or facilities, and ignore the valuable, creative ideas and perspectives of teams in development, service delivery, advocacy and other areas.

- **Be a renaissance (wo)man** – The terms ‘renaissance man’ and ‘polymath’ are used to describe people whose interests and expertise span multiple subject areas. Grasping the strategic and operational risks facing a complex nonprofit requires knowing a lot about a lot. To be a renaissance risk professional, you need to seek and seize every opportunity to learn about the far corners of your discipline. Strengthen your skills in areas where you excel while seeking new knowledge across a broad spectrum of topics relevant to the success of your nonprofit, from strategic planning, to governance, risk financing and workplace safety.

After reading these tips, you might still believe that creativity seems at odds with risk management. Risk management is a discipline often concerned with being right and precise, and at times almost mathematical (e.g., Do we know about all the risks that we face? How can we rank or score our risks? How likely is it that a risk event will occur? What is the potential cost of a specific risk event?). Yet Joseph Chilton Pearce, an American author who wrote about the human heart and mind, said, “to live a creative life, we must lose our fear of being wrong.” So to bring a creative lens to the discipline of risk management, we Risk Champions must first face our own fears of being wrong, thus inviting our colleagues to do the same. Maybe then we can all make peace with uncertainty. Though it’s impossible to predict every risk your nonprofit will face, with a creative eye and respect for the natural power of uncertainty, your team can better connect the dots and anticipate the risks that are heading your way.

The authors of *Wired to Create* remind their readers that, “new experiences provide the crucial tissue of real-world material that can be spun into creative work... we need new and unusual experiences to think differently.” Being open to new and unique experiences is a key precursor to embracing creativity. Although I purchased *Wired to Create* in the hopes it would help me be a better, more appreciative teammate to the creative members of our team, I discovered other valuable lessons, including the potent reminder that openness to experience is a starting point for my own creative thinking and doing.

To get your creative juices flowing, take a look at our other resources:

- Our brand new, intensive educational program for Risk Champions: [the Risk Leadership Certificate Program](#)
- Our newest resource and very first mobile app: [VolunteerProtect!](#)
- [Creative infographics](#) meant to educate readers about risk while entertaining them
- [Applications](#) we developed to help nonprofit leaders create their own risk management plans and organizational policies

The Nonprofit Risk Management Center team is proud to develop creative, custom risk resources for our clients and the nonprofit sector. Call us to learn about what we can create with you: 703.777.3504.

*Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your creative responses to this article at 703.777.3504 or [Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org](mailto:Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org).*