Everything’s Coming Up Weeds

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After record rainfall in April and May, the front yards, gardens and farms look especially lush in the area of Virginia where I live. Everything is thriving… including the weeds. Extracting the bumper crop of weeds from my flower beds is requiring a bit more time than I had budgeted for the maintenance of my garden. While battling the weeds this past weekend I found myself reflecting on the “weeds” that crop up in nonprofit organizations. One example of an organizational “weed” is an out of date policy.

After a recent presentation in Texas an audience member approached me to discuss her nonprofit’s employment policies. She indicated that over time the nonprofit’s employment policies had grown unwieldy. We discussed the fact that many organizations begin with a simple personnel manual that grows in length and complexity with the addition of new policies. An attendance policy is added to address the habitual tardiness by employees in one department. A social media policy is adopted after an online posting by an employee causes embarrassment. The resulting “manual” is a collection of mismatched policies that are far from cohesive.

Allowing the unfettered growth of policies in an organization is a bit like allowing the weeds to overcome your rose garden. Over time it will be hard to see and enjoy the colorful, fragrant blooms. If weeding your nonprofit’s collection of policies is overdue, consider the following tips:

- **Get help**. Remember that an effective way to increase acceptance of any changes you propose is to involve a group with diverse perspectives in the process. Consider forming a team to examine your collection of policies and choose those that require pruning or elimination. A team-based approach is also a way to share the burden of the process.
- **Cast a wide net**. Don’t limit your review to the employee handbook. Job descriptions, operating procedures, governance policies, financial policies, safety/security policies, and even your contracting policy may be out of date. Consider creating a spreadsheet of key policies with a column indicating when each policy was adopted and/or updated. This visual aid may be helpful in identifying the policies that are most likely to require attention.
- **Whenever possible, simplify**. Keep in mind that complexity may increase the likelihood that a policy will be misunderstood or misapplied. As you identify necessary changes in policies, look for ways to simplify. Choose commonly understood terms in lieu of jargon. Weed out any language that may confuse or lead to varying interpretations.
- **Think ahead**. Before proposing changes in policy or practice, consider how the people in your nonprofit will be affected. Reflect on how, when and to whom you will need to communicate changes. Give some thought to how you will address resistance to change.

Taking time to “weed” organizational policies is an essential part of effective risk management. Out of date policies intended to reduce the likelihood of harm may increase your exposure to loss. Unwieldy policies impair agility and may limit opportunities to innovate and seize opportunities. Organizational circumstances, strategies and policy needs change over time. Periodic pruning is less costly and ultimately more effective than waiting until the garden is completely overgrown.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your ideas about any risk management topic, feedback on this article and questions about the Center’s resources at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504. The Center provides risk management tools and resources at www.https://nonprofitrisk.org/ and offers consulting assistance to organizations unwilling to leave their missions to chance.