

## Friends, Not Food



**By Melanie Lockwood Herman**

Executive Director

**Resource Type:** Articles

**Topic:** Governance

There are a host of memorable quips and conversations in the 2003 film *Finding Nemo*. One of my favorite moments in the film involves the strangely lovable shark, Bruce, and his epiphany about friendship at sea. Bruce reflects on the need to change his image by changing his behavior when he says: “I am a nice shark, not a mindless eating machine. If I am to change this image, I must first change myself. Fish are friends, not food.” A similar sentiment—about change “starting with me”—is set to music in the song “Man in the Mirror,” recorded by Michael Jackson.

Recalling Bruce’s revelation and Michael’s music has led me to reflect on how fear about what others think or might think sometimes dampens enthusiasm to shine the light on our organizations to internal and external audiences. Myths about nonprofits spread like tiny fish food pellets in a tank, and bad news about nonprofits is devoured with the gusto familiar to any tropical fish owner. One of the unfortunate results of the speed with which inaccurate or damaging information spreads, is the decision by some sector leaders to shirk from, rather than embrace, the call for greater transparency.

During conversations with sector leaders in recent weeks I’ve been asked “how transparent do we really need to be?!” and “Do we really need to tell the full board about that?” I’ve begun talking about the benefits of internal and external transparency as valuable levers in a risk management program. A concerted effort to increase transparency:

- Reduces miscommunication and missteps that result from wrongful assumptions and “I didn’t know!” moments;
- Increases the opportunity to surface past or ongoing mistakes that require reflection and action;
- Inspires confidence on the part of the staff and board, which in turns fuels the deep commitment needed from all personnel who deliver the nonprofit’s ambitious mission and execute its strategies and plans; and
- Demonstrates humility, a quality that both leaders and organizations in our sector need.

But as Bruce realized in *Finding Nemo*, changing our “image” begins with changing our behavior. If we hope to reap the benefits of transparency and attract true partners to advance our missions, we need to get comfortable *being* transparent and we also need to stop feasting on the misfortunes of our nonprofit friends. And for some sector leaders and leading organizations, it may take a bit of practice to feel at ease with the curtains drawn back and light streaming in.

*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](mailto:Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org) or (202) 785-3891. The Center provides risk management tools and resources at [www.nonprofitrisk.org/](http://www.nonprofitrisk.org/) and offers [consulting assistance](#) to organizations unwilling to leave their missions to chance.*