Future Focused: 3 Virtues and Vows



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“But you can build a future out of anything. A scrap, a flicker. The desire to go forward, slowly, one foot at a time. You can build an airy city out of ruins.”
— Lauren Oliver, Pandemonium

This week I’ve been reading the October/November issue of *Fast Company*. In a piece titled “The New New Rules of Business,” the editors of the magazine share insights from the Fast Company Impact Council, which they describe as “an invitation-only group of forward-thinking corporate and nonprofit leaders…” asked to help the magazine develop a “prescription for the next 25 years and beyond.”

How is your team envisioning your organization’s future and the risks you will take and face along the way? Are you building a foundation that will support an effective, financially sound, equitable, and just organization? In *A Theory of Justice*, political philosopher John Rawls writes that “A just society is a society that if you knew everything about it, you’d be willing to enter it in a random place.” Does your nonprofit live up to that bold ideal? If not, why not? The best and brightest nonprofit missions should inspire the ABCs: awe, bold risk-taking, and commitment. However, birthing a nonprofit doesn’t *require* a commitment to treating employees the way you would want to be treated. Or even the recognition that doing so is an essential part of a foundation that will support your mission through thick and thin.

As I think about the future of our nonprofit sector, I was inspired by several of the “new new rules” of business. I was also inspired by recent interactions with team members from our consulting client organizations and Affiliate Members. Instead of ‘rules,’ though, I see them as virtues and vows. Here’s my take on three virtues to propel your mission into the unknown future and beyond.

Democracy at work. Upon hearing one of my siblings or me wail, “That isn’t fair, Dad!” my father often responded by reminding us that “This isn’t a democracy; it’s a benevolent dictatorship!” This witty retort, of unknown origin, is a reminder that few workplaces are true democracies, whereby a majority of staff ‘control the organization.’ At NRMC, we’ve seen how rigid reporting structures and norms dampen commitment and engagement, lead to duplication of effort, and spur dreaded ‘organizational drag.’ Worse, rigid hierarchies make it difficult (or impossible) to source innovative solutions for troubling risks team members are fighting on the front lines or managing in the middle. Team members whose views and perspectives are genuinely valued are far more likely to be effective risk management champions than “voluntold” staffers on the receiving end of

stern edicts from the risk higher-ups. We love one of the tenets expressed on www.holacracy.org: “Every individual acts as a “sensor” for the organization and has direct pathways for processing their challenges and opportunities into organizational change.”

Sense and Authenticity. *Fast Company’s* editors write that “Perhaps no word is at more risk of devolving into corporate-speak than authentic, and yet the concept behind it is more crucial than ever. For leaders there seems to be no greater virtue; for brands, no higher aspiration.” Here, here! One of the most troubling risks we uncover in risk assessments is a disconnect—and sometimes a chasm—between a nonprofit’s professed values and the experience of serving the organization’s mission. Another aspect of inauthentic leadership is when leaders request or demand candor while continuing to project unwavering confidence that the future will unfold in the manner described by the leader.

Make, Don’t Wait on Change. *Fast Company’s* editors wryly note that “Companies say they embrace change, but all too often they are really just reacting to external forces.” Reactionary risk management is both familiar and relatively uncomplicated. Risk leaders compile long lists (“registers”) of bad things that have either happened before or calamities that unknown third parties might cause. Then, make wild guesses about the “probability” (likelihood) and potential “impact” (severity) of the risk. Assign a ‘risk owner,’ and you’re off to the races! Writing things down can be helpful when added to appreciating the complex, ever-changing ‘risk landscape’ surrounding your mission. But the most interesting and, arguably, impactful aspect of risk management is problem-solving focused on the changes you choose to make to propel your mission forward. For example:

- What changes will we make to help team members feel comfortable elevating bad news, mistakes, and near misses?
- What changes will we make to take the fear out of risk-taking?
- What changes must we make to elicit fresh thinking and bold ideas from junior or historically marginalized team members?

It’s true that nonprofits have the benefit of teams who often feel compelled serve at the pleasure of a higher purpose. However, it’s short-sighted to assume that the mission is enough. Leaders who recognize that elevating their practices to include just and equitable cultures will increase employee engagement and harness even more innovation for their missions. Looking toward the close of 2020 and into the future of 2021 and beyond, nonprofit leaders can use these three virtues – democracy, authenticity, and proactive change-making – to steer and guide their organizations toward maximum employee satisfaction and mission fulfillment.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your reflections and insights on virtues and vows for elevating your nonprofit’s culture and risk response at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.