

Risk Management Leaders Must be Unstoppably Optimistic



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“Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier.” – Colin Powell

In his article, “How to Lead in 2018,” Fast Company editor Robert Safian beckons his readers to embrace optimistic leadership by staring “unblinkingly at this time of chaos and dig into the difficult work of building a better tomorrow.” Across our work at NRMC, we meet leaders who exemplify this mode of optimistic leadership despite facing serious challenges in areas such as financial sustainability, staff turnover, and even legal challenges to their missions or particular initiatives. The “How to Lead With Optimism” edition of Fast Company (February 2018) features 185 lessons and insights from leaders who’ve learned how to lead with contagious positivity.

- **When it’s Stressful, Be Still** – Safian reminds us that the mind shines through stress when given a moment to rest and reflect. Safian recounts advice from a colleague about how to keep emotions in check in a stressful or unpleasant situation: “Before you say something in anger, count backward from 100.” He also reminds us to recharge by drowning out stressors and noise: “The sound of silence is the sound of something thinking.”
- **Reach Out to Touch Someone** – During the final few weeks of last year, I got a jump start on a resolution for the New Year: using my phone instead of my keyboard to reach out. In some cases, the only purpose of my call was to say “thank you for supporting NRMC’s mission.” Safian’s article reminded me that empathy—best achieved through face-to-face contact—unlocks “capacity and creativity.” We’ve found that the benefits of personal contact and empathy abound. An associate recently went out of his way to help us and thanked an NRMC team member for calling—rather than emailing—to ask him a favor.
- **Make Peace with the Mess** – The incredibly complex and competitive (yes, I said it!) nonprofit sector means that “messiness” and uncertainty rule the day. Rather than trying to oversimplify and tidy up your environment, make peace with the mess by modeling a learning workplace. Today a colleague at a youth-serving nonprofit (also an NRMC [Affiliate Member](#)) shared a key component of her organization’s culture: developing a “mastery climate,” in which team members and young participants are allowed to make messes and mistakes, but are expected to learn from them.
- **Lift Every Voice** – Safian writes that “Diversity is not just a social issue; it is a business requirement.” A commitment to diversity requires a corresponding commitment to inclusion—actions by leaders and team members throughout an organization that dismantle barriers to participating, speaking up, and feeling welcome and respected. The NRMC team strives to lift every voice during our [Risk Assessment](#)

engagements, by inviting commentary on critical risks from nonprofit staff members, executive leaders, and board members who wish to share their personal perspectives.

- **Trounce Uncertainty with Preparation** – In the profile on Miami Marlins co-owner and CEO, Derek Jeter, Jeter says that preparation makes a game slow down, while lack of preparation makes athletes feel as though everything has sped up. Preparation and contingency planning can help nonprofit leaders remain nimble yet steady in a mercurial environment. Steadiness and preparation will guide us when we must speed up innovation to keep pace with the world around us, or as Safian describes: “move quickly, but don’t rush!”
- **Find Meaning in Values** – Stripe cofounder John Collison shares, “It’s easy [to devise and live by a set of values] when you’re starting out. But as an organization grows, you have all these competing priorities. Culture is what happens when the CEO isn’t in the room.” Leaders can look for cultural inconsistencies with corporate values, and address these challenges openly with the input of their teams. Involve beloved team members in identifying and combating value-crushing cultural norms that a CEO or other executives might not be privy to.
- **Be the Optimist Your Mission Deserves** – David Miliband, President and CEO of the International Rescue Committee, says “Whatever is going on, your number-one responsibility is to have a mind-set at work that says, ‘We can solve this.’” Risk leaders serving as [mission champions](#) know that risk management is solution-oriented and should pave the way for taking *more* risk: risk that solves the world’s problems and spurs progress toward strategic goals.

Take a page from the optimist’s handbook—and the success stories of the business leaders showcased in *Fast Company*—to reinvigorate your risk program with compelling courage and hope. Turn every team member into a risk-aware mission steward propelled by shared optimism for your nonprofit’s mission.

If you’re still feeling stuck as “the Department of ‘No!’” or the fun police, then call the NRMCM team at 703.777.3504 to learn how we can turn your risk-averse frown upside down, into a smile of confident, optimistic leadership.

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