

Getting Social



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As our team worked to put the finishing touches on the agenda for the annual summit we're releasing today, we found ourselves incorporating themes from the thought-provoking book two of us have been reading: [The Social Animal](#). In the chapter titled "Attachment," author and journalist David Brooks discusses the correlation between an ability to develop meaningful relationships with peers and authority figures and a child's prospects for academic success in school. Research suggests that a child's social skills can inspire or hinder academic achievement. Throughout [The Social Animal](#) the author explores the "deeply social aspect" of the mind. Brooks presents an entertaining, relationship-driven narrative to illustrate how the unconscious mind does the heavy lifting when it comes to decision-making.

As I read [The Social Animal](#) I thought about how so many nonprofit leaders have tried to inject logic-driven "business practices" into the nonprofit workplace. Terms like "return on investment" and "metrics" roll off the tongues of nonprofit leaders. And throughout our sector nonprofit executives regularly affirm their understanding that a nonprofit is indeed a "business." But in our zeal to be disciplined and respected "business" leaders have we discounted the importance of relationships? Have we unknowingly emphasized performance metrics at the expense of human connections?

When I began my career in the nonprofit sector I naively believed that mutual respect negated the need to be liked. I adopted and often repeated the mantra of a then-popular business guru: "I don't care if you like me. All I care about is whether you respect me." My naïve approach to supervising others ignored two key facts: first, that nonprofit employees are social animals, and second, that relationships are an essential part of a healthy environment necessary for mission-advancement.

During a site visit to a new client this week I was surprised to see an inviting and comfortable break area located adjacent to rows of cubicles. I was told that teams at the organization take turns using the break area, and I observed one team that seemed to be enjoying its well-deserved downtime. How refreshing to visit a workplace where "taking a break" from work is taken seriously. The organization also celebrates the social nature of its staff by encouraging each employee to decorate their workspace and by pairing new staff members with staff mentors.

Brooks reminds readers of [The Social Animal](#) that changing one's environment is an effective way to change one's behavior and attitude.

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