

Happiness...Just Beyond the Bend



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I generally tuck incoming issues of the weekly publication [The Economist](#) somewhere safe to read and savor at a more convenient time. The December 18th-31st Special Holiday Double Issue however offered this middle-age reader an irresistible headline and I was compelled to read the lead story without delay. The story, titled “The joy of growing old (or why life begins at 46),” explores the “U-bend of life”—the widely accepted and researched theory that levels of stress, worry, anger and sadness *fall* in later life. The article notes that “People are least happy in their 40s and early 50s. They reach a nadir at a global average of 46.” The writers of *The Economist* article offer several intriguing theories about the finding that being 30 or 40-ish may be hazardous to your happiness, including: “People in their 40s, for instance, often have teenage children. Could the misery of the middle-age be the consequence of sharing space with angry adolescents?” That explanation sounded reasonable to this reader who happens to be the parent of a moody teen!

But the writers acknowledge that the presence of teenagers in a household has been considered in some of the studies and discredited as the cause for middle-age angst. The real explanation, they say, is in human behavior. “People, studies show, behave differently at different ages. Older people have fewer rows and come up with better solutions to conflict. They are better at controlling their emotions, better at accepting misfortune and less prone to anger.”

As readers of this weekly *e-news* know, I’m a voracious reader. With rare exceptions, I always *learn* something when I read, whether my reading material is a magazine article or business text. But I rarely feel *happier* after reading. This week’s article on “The U-bend of life” put a smile on my face. It made me *feel* happy and gave me much to look forward to!

This week in countless offices across the U.S. a multitude of nonprofit staff members will observe that 2010 “flew by.” Many staff members will wonder “where the time went.” It is traditional to spend some of the remaining time in the current year looking *back*. I invite you to consider going against the grain and instead get a jump start on *looking forward* to 2011. Why not use some portion of the hours that remain in 2010 to make a risk-oriented “wish list” for the coming year? Consider noting:

- What changes in risk appetite are required to dramatically advance the mission of your nonprofit.
- The additional expertise and support you will need in 2011 to better understand and appreciate the risks your nonprofit will face in the coming year and manage your organization in the face of risk.
- The steps you will take to encourage others on the staff and board to take an interest in the risk-reward

equation.

- The first obvious opportunity in 2011 to demonstrate your commitment to a broader perspective on risk. A broader perspective means going beyond the traditional narrow approach which regards risk as the potential for harm or loss.

As you prepare to ring in the New Year this weekend I invite you to skip the customary sentimentalism about the year that is almost over, and move without delay to happy anticipation of 2011. And while you're looking forward to the uptick in personal happiness that is inevitable as you near or grow even more distant from the "U-bend" in your life, remember to take a few minutes to look forward to the advances that are certain to occur in your nonprofit's risk management program and efforts.

As always, don't hesitate to reach out to us at the Center if we can assist you in your journey to organizational contentment. While few leaders would think of a risk management organization being in the "happiness" business, we have a pretty good track record of helping nonprofit leaders cease unproductive worrying and start sleeping more peacefully.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your feedback on this article and organizational happiness, 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.nonprofitrisk.org/ and offers custom consulting assistance.