

Heartfelt Risk Lessons From an Authoritarian Piano Teacher



By Christy Grano

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If you learned to play a musical instrument as a child, like I did, then you may agree that music appreciation does not always happen in the first few lessons. How many of us wish that our 10-year-old selves had recognized the magic of musical expression, rather than avoided practice? Like many kids whose music lessons were required by well-meaning parents, my siblings and I eventually learned to enjoy playing the piano, but only after several years of grappling with the discipline required for mastery (or even competence). Ironically, in college I became a piano teacher, and it was me pushing students past their dislikes so they could enjoy the benefits of playing well.

Even as adult learners we can struggle through difficult work, especially when gratification appears to be delayed or uncertain. Risk management is no exception. Some of the tasks assigned to risk leaders are toilsome: completing insurance renewal paperwork, managing a complex claim, or securing attestation of key risk policies.

When Risk Solutions Don't Strike a Chord the First Time

At NRMC we have seen pushback for changes that could directly improve operations at nonprofits, but which may not seem worthwhile until they are implemented and become routine. Below are some examples of risk management changes we've seen leadership and staff teams reluctant to embrace on the road to appreciation:

- **Changes to the size or composition of the board:** The makeup of the board is vital to every mission, but changes can be hard when members are attached to their roles and habitual functions. Even when the need for change is obvious, [adding more board members](#) to fill important governance roles or cutting back to a simpler board structure can take an extra dose of determination.
- **Changes in the number, length, or style of board meetings:** Unproductive or poorly-run meetings cause undue stress, sap enthusiasm, and impede interesting discussion and bold decisions. We've seen that [sprucing up your board meeting practices](#) generally leads to great rewards, but many nonprofit leaders have shared that they were doubtful our suggested changes would improve the quality of governance.
- **New training requirements for volunteers:** We've seen many clients endure a tough trip to appreciation when it comes to new [training procedures](#), especially when training requires more work for the nonprofit's volunteers. But we've also seen that once these new training requirements become routine, nonprofit staff and volunteers alike grow to enjoy the confidence provided by a safer

environment.

- **New screening and visitor identification policies:** Ease of access can be a surprisingly touchy subject if your staff, members, volunteers and guests are used to moving freely in and out of your facilities. We've seen that once visitor screening and badge requirements are in place, they become routine and natural, even if the change felt unpleasant to teammates at first.
- **New limitations on alcohol offerings at meetings:** Alcohol policies can be difficult to swallow if your nonprofit has a tradition of modest alcohol at meetings, but for many nonprofits the risks outweigh the reward. We've seen thoughtful leaders put gentle restrictions on alcohol consumption that were first met with resistance, but later seen as a mature move.

Tips on Building Appreciation without Tears

Is your nonprofit considering risk management changes where the benefits may not be fully understood or appreciated quite yet? You know you're in the pre-appreciation zone if you are receiving feedback from the team that your idea:

- creates more work
- is too complicated
- will slow things down
- probably won't have the desired effect anyway
- all of the above

If the path to safe risk management practices looks daunting, don't give up! Here are our top tips for building understanding and strengthening your team when risk appreciation is absent:

- **Illuminate the Problem.** Resistance to risk management can frequently be traced to team members who are simply uninformed of the risks underpinning management's decisions. Budget time to gain a clear understanding of the *problem* before you start to offer a solution; once your team understands how risk management directly supports your organization's mission, buy-in can be much easier.
- **Communicate don't Complicate.** Let people know what's happening, clearly and directly, especially if the new risk management technique is complicated in any small way. For example, if a new policy is being implemented that prohibits the use of cell phones while driving, explain what to do if an urgent text is received during a commute. Be sure that the new policy anticipates staff concerns. Is texting at stop lights permitted, or only while pulled over and safely parked?
- **Hone your Humility.** One of the surest ways a leader can build dissent rather than support is to give the impression—intentionally or not—that he or she has no concept of how difficult a change may be. In addition to transparency about why risk policies exist, it's important to communicate humility, gratefulness, and empathy as the situation demands.
- **Be an Inclusive Listener.** When considering a controversial decision, it can be tempting to avoid input from those who are likely to disagree. However, taking the time to listen to all angles tends to build trust and understanding in addition to providing a more comprehensive perspective. One approach for difficult decisions is called "[broad-narrow-broad](#)"—spend time gathering a broad range of inputs, then select a small (narrow) team to evaluate the feedback and suggest a solution. After gathering consensus from the smaller team, bounce their ideas off of a larger audience one more time before implementing. This approach can help a large team feel heard and properly included in the decision process. A tip we would add to this technique is to make sure you keep *all* the top decision makers in the loop—at NRMC we have seen great risk management ideas gain momentum but then stall because key leaders were left out of the conversation.
- **Plan to Evaluate and Re-evaluate.** Even when a new risk management policy is finally published, it's still a work in progress. Policies need to be dynamic and adjustable to the changing risk landscape. Listen for feedback and be honest if a new policy doesn't settle in well and needs modification. One of our favorite books to recommend on this topic is [A Complaint is a Gift, by Jenelle Barlow and Claus Moller](#)—a great guide on how to mold feedback into constructive action.

Patience Pays, Give Your Policies a Fair Chance

Sometimes good risk management requires nonprofit leaders to make swift changes whether or not their team feels ready to give new plans, policies, or procedures a chance. Frequently, I will remember my own advice as a piano teacher: "It's okay—push through for a bit and you'll see the benefits soon." A good teacher keeps an eye on that horizon where the student will first experience the thrill of their hard work paying off. The NRMC team encourages risk management champions to do the same: humbly evaluate and re-evaluate your risk

management practices, but also be patient enough for your team to catch up, feel the positive results, and provide feedback in the new setting.

Looking for more ways to build appreciation for risk management and resiliency in your workplace? We recommend these additional articles to learn more about pushing through and building buy-in for risk management at your nonprofit:

- [Designing a Durable, Doable Risk Management Function and Capabilities](#)
- [Obtaining Buy-In and Support for Your Critical Risk Management Policies](#)
- [What's in a Word? Risk Management Leaders as Mission Champions](#)
- [5 Questions to Re-Focus Your Risk Function](#)