

The Power of Ten



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Earlier today I received a notice about a school-related function that will be held on 10/10/10, a date the invitation described as “The Powers of Ten Day.” While reading the notice I was reminded that the line-up for Center’s annual conference will include a number of firsts, including six workshops offering fast-paced content under a “top ten” series banner. My motivation for offering the series was unrelated to the fact that our national conference will in fact begin on 10/10/10. (I do wish I were *that* clever.) Pondering the topic led me to a little online research to learn more about “The Powers of Ten Day.”

My research quickly turned up a short film I have not seen for many years. Released in 1977, the film, titled [“Powers of Ten”](#) was made by Charles and Ray Eames. The nine minute film begins with an overhead shot of a simple picnic scene and takes viewers on a “journey out to the edge of space and then back into a carbon atom...” The reverse journey begins at a distance of 100 million light years from the picnic. This short but compelling film shows how *perspective* changes based on distance from the scene. It also illustrates how something can be both “normal” and “unfamiliar.”

My work during the past several weeks coupled with my viewing of the [“Powers of Ten”](#) reminded me of the lesson of perspective in the discipline of risk management. Individuals within and around an organization have varying perspectives on the organization, often influenced by their “view.” One’s “view” of the organization could be related to the formal or informal role served, longevity of involvement, sense of connection or commitment to the mission, past history with similar organizations, life experience, and myriad other factors. It is rare to encounter two nonprofit leaders who see and describe the organization they both serve in a similar fashion.

During risk assessments we interview as many as a dozen “stakeholders” from our client nonprofit. Just as an interview subject’s description of the CEO’s management style, governance practices, mission or principal risks begins to remind me of a conversation with a prior interviewee, the person I am speaking to invariably offers an insight I haven’t heard from others. Or in some cases an interview subject will say something that while “normal” in organizational life seems unfamiliar based on my understanding of the nonprofit at that particular point in time. These individual, sometimes overlapping but never duplicative perspectives create something akin to a photographic mosaic rather than a crystal clear, high mega-pixel image of the organization.

I have learned from many years of working with leaders of nonprofits that expecting others to see an

organization, including its greatest opportunities or dangers, through one's own lens is an impediment to effective leadership and thoughtful risk management.

Warren Bennis reminds us to: "Learn to ask people for their opinions before you decide, not after." Like the underlying theme in "[Powers of Ten](#)," this cogent advice points to tremendous power in the spectrum of human perspective. Exploring in earnest varying perspectives is invaluable to those who seek to better understand the nature of risk in nonprofit organizations and the options we face as leaders to evaluate risk and adjust behavior, systems and strategy in the face of risk.

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