Round and Round: The Leadership Learning Loop



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Several years ago I listened to a compelling interview with Katlin Smith on the NPR program "How I Built This," hosted by Guy Raz. Smith founded Simple Mills while working as a management consultant at Deloitte and attending the first year of an MBA program. Per the company's website, "Simple Mills is on a mission to change what's available in grocery stores and make nutrient-dense, whole foods delicious and convenient."

I found Smith's story of building a baking goods company—forgive the pun—from scratch genuinely fascinating. From her initial cold call to a local Whole Foods store to inquire what it would take to get a new product on their shelves, to her wise decision to turn down a much-needed investment offer when the offeror proposed overly aggressive terms, Smith's story is one of 'learning by doing.' During the interview, she explains to Raz that "leadership is learned" and admits to making newbie mistakes while supervising her initial management team.

Like the art of baking, leadership is learned, not inbred. None of us emerge from the womb knowing how to motivate, guide, nurture, or mentor others. Nor do we know how our actions or leadership 'style' might de-motivate, distract, or discourage those we've enlisted to advance a nonprofit mission. My daughter and I enjoy sharing swapping stories and photos of our respective baking triumphs and catastrophes. She lets me know about loaves that failed to rise, rolls that could be mistaken for doorstops, and muffins with minimal redeeming qualities. With each bake, we pick up a new lesson that that we apply to subsequent attempts. We routinely consult—but aren't committed—to following recipes. From our distant kitchens, we're each trying to make sense of the process, find a technique that feels 'right', and improve our baking craft, one loaf or peach cobbler at a time.

Try These Risk Leadership Techniques

With the exception of those who wear the risk leadership *and* CEO hats in a nonprofit, most risk leaders do not have the authority to command-and-control large teams to do their bidding. Therefore, risk leaders must often draw on other skills to inspire a risk-aware approach to decision-making and compliance with sound policies that others may perceive as unnecessary 'organizational drag.'

Inspire vulnerability and curiosity. In his book, *Leadership is Language: The Hidden Power of What You Say—and What You Don't*, author David Marquet urges leaders to replace the language of 'prove and perform' with 'be vulnerable and curious.' He writes that "I learned…that waiting for people to prove themselves in order for me to trust them was backward. I need to entrust people with authority and autonomy in order to give them

the opportunity to prove themselves."

Ask for ideas and input before sharing your own. I attended a board meeting many years ago where the board had divided opinions on one of the agenda items. The board chair began the segment by telling everyone that she thought forming a Governance Committee of the board was a bad idea. She then went around the table and invited others to weigh in. It appeared that the motion to form the committee was likely to fail until she reached the person seated to her right—the husband of her best friend. This gentleman announced that "I was going to vote no—we don't need another committee—but I am troubled that you as the chair told us what to think before asking what we thought. For that reason, my vote is yes."

Remember that leadership and relationships are inextricably linked. If you don't like people or don't like being in relationships, then a risk leadership role (or any leadership role) isn't for you! In *The Business of Friendship*, Shasta Nelson writes, "Leadership, above all else, is relationship." Relationships are messy and often awkward. Nelson shares the following touching quote from Frank Andrews, Ph.D.: "It seems impossible to love people who hurt and disappoint us, yet there are no other kinds of people." (Andrews is the author of *The Art of and Practice of Loving*.)

Embrace unique practices and errors. The NRMC team fields frequent inquiries about 'best practices' in every aspect of risk practice. While we're eager to share examples of what has 'worked' here and there, we always caution callers and clients that 'what works in another environment may not work for you!' We also caution teams about the risk of not taking risks (in risk practice and elsewhere!), often due to the fear of making an error. The authors of *What Philosophy Can Teach You About Being a Better Leader* remind us that "Results do not come from best practices but rather from unique practices, from embracing error as opposed to avoiding error." They remind us of the potency of inspiring others through actions versus relying on words: "What would it be like if leaders set an example through their behavior rather than set direction through their instructions?"

Gently Mix Luck and Working Crazy Hard

Near the end of her "How I Built This" interview, entrepreneur Katlin Smith attributes her company's success to "luck and crazy hard work." All too often, leaders accept credit for their organization's success, financial and otherwise. And it's arguably appropriate for a Board to first evaluate whether a nonprofit's financial bottom line is healthy and shows improvement before considering changes in CEO compensation. However, for those of us who have the privilege of leading—organizations, risk functions, or teams of any sort—remember to give credit where it is undoubtedly due, to the people who do the lion's share of the work, to luck and to 'working crazy hard.

If you aren't 'learning as you lead,' then you're not really leading. Look around you—to the newest team member, seasoned staff, other leaders in your nonprofit, and leaders you admire in public service and industry—for insights and inspiration to hone your leadership acumen. Your mission deserves the life-long learner's perspective that risk leadership requires.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center and a sector thought leader who believes that what she will learn this year will be eye-opening, inspiring, and challenge her current thinking about everything. She welcomes your feedback about learning, leadership, and the wide world of risk at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org