

To Reach Your Risk Potential, Tell Better Stories



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This month I've been obsessively watching Season #1 of [The Big Door Prize, on AppleTV+](#). The show's mechanical protagonist is Morpho, a machine that—after collecting two bits of Personally Identifiable Information—offers a forecast of one's 'true potential'. Reactions from townsfolk to the machine's prophecies range from delight to detachment and despair. The show's plot reminds me of the human craving to conquer uncertainty and know—with confidence—how things will turn out. Of course, if it were possible to divine the future, those of us in the risk biz might need to think about new career paths!

When I'm not watching the latest episode of the show, I'm wrapping up one of my favorite recent reads, *Radical Curiosity* by Seth Goldenberg. I've found so much to unpack and reflect on in this terrific book. One of the themes that drew my attention was in Chapter 4, *Stories as Regenerative Catalysts*. Goldenberg writes that:

"We don't do well with uncertainty, and so we seek out stories to help our minds synthesize patterns to make sense of a nonsensical world. Stories hold us in place, anchoring us in a world that is ever-changing. Stories are a calm anchor amid the storm of uncertainty. And in uncertain in-between times, the stories we tell ourselves are powerful frameworks that help us work out who we are in the present moment and what we value. They lure us into becoming our aspirational selves."

Goldenberg's chapter on stories reminded me that stories bring value as well as danger in the risk realm. The value lies in the potent potential of stories to bring scenarios and risk plans to life. By imagining how things could unfold under a variety of circumstances, we can help teams identify and implement practical preparations.

But stories can also get us off track and into dangerous territory by distracting us from the work we must do to build mission resilience. Over the years I've heard more than a handful of senior nonprofit leaders say, "We're not like that organization; that kind of thing couldn't happen here." Goldenberg cautions against storytelling that morphs into mission mythology, writing that "We tell ourselves stories that become such deeply rooted mythologies that we think them to be unquestionable truths and forget they are only stories authored by others before us."

Reckoning with Myths

What are your nonprofit's myths? Stories that are accepted as "unquestionable truths"? How might the stories

you tell about your history, founders, business model or values stand in the way of understanding your top risks? Of unpacking the ‘what if’ future events and circumstances that could be disruptive? Of understanding whether some of your work to help others could also cause harm?

I love the concept of a mirror as a tool for seeing our true selves. But I also know that if I tilt a wall mirror backward—just a tad—I will be taller and slimmer than my true self. Like mirrors, the stories that morph into mission mythology are imperfect reflections of our past and present. Reflecting honestly on what we know—and acknowledging the vastness of what we can’t possibly know—is essential to leading others through candid conversations about risk.

Sharpen Storytelling Skills at the Risk Summit

The NRMCM team is excited to welcome Anthony A. Dicks, Jr. as our keynote speaker at the opening session of the [2023 Risk Summit](#). As a Senior Leadership Consultant for the 180 Management Group, Anthony helps leaders with diverse responsibilities reach their true potential.

We’re delighted that Anthony has accepted our invitation to explain how to harness storytelling to amplify the success of risk activities in a nonprofit. We know that the connection leaders make with staff often determines which teams will engage with rapt attention and which ones often just check boxes. Risk Summit attendees want to inspire buy-in to risk management practices well beyond compliance minimums. Join us this fall to learn more about the power of storytelling and its potential role in fortifying your risk function!

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She invites you to reach out to share how you’re using stories to achieve your risk program’s true potential, at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703-777-3504.