

# Toss Your To-Do List



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“Connect today to all your tomorrows. It matters.” – Gary Keller

I’ve just finished reading *The ONE Thing: The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results*, by Gary Keller. The premise of the book is that achieving “extraordinary results” is “directly determined by how narrow you can make your focus.” This premise reminded me of the ambitious work plans and risk-inspired goals of the risk professionals NRMC encounters through our [consulting engagements](#) and [Affiliate Member](#) program.

I’m a compulsive maker of to-do-lists; they fill up post-it notes that ring my monitor at the office, clutter the Notes feature on my iPhone, and there’s even one titled “2017 House Projects” still tacked to my refrigerator at home. I’ve always thought that these lists were motivating, productivity enhancers. Keller dispenses with my naïve understanding of to-do lists. He writes that “To-do lists are a staple of the time-management-and-success industry. With our wants and others’ wishes flying at us right and left, we impulsively jot them down on scraps of paper in moments of clarity or build them methodically on printed notepads... though lists are invaluable, they have a dark side...” He cautions that a typical to-do list can easily become a tyrannical list of trivial tasks. These collections illustrate our best intentions but may not represent “A-List” items that will enable us to achieve ultimate goals.

Keller goes on to explain that “To-do lists tend to be long; success lists are short. One pulls you in all directions; the other aims you in a specific direction.” He urges readers to “Allow what matters most to drive your day,” and recapture the true meaning of priority. Whoa!

## What Matters Most

With Keller’s advice in mind, I want to challenge RISK eNews readers to identify the “ONE Thing” that could transport or transform risk management practice at your nonprofit. Alternatively, what’s the one risk you could zero in on this year that might make other risks less likely or less disruptive? Recently I told a new ERM client that “there is no prize for having the longest list of risks!” We often hear from consulting clients that they already have a long list of “what could go wrong” and that they are hoping my team will add a few unknown unknowns to the tally. Creating vast unwieldy lists exposes your team to what thought leader James Lam calls “Enterprise *List* Management” instead of Enterprise *Risk* Management. Gary Keller’s hierarchical framework for goal management is a refreshing method we can apply to the discipline of risk management.

## Start with a Someday Risk Management Goal

This is a collapsed version of Keller's "Goal Setting to the Now" framework, which actually includes five stages between "someday" and "right now." The critical takeaway from Keller's framework is focusing on a *singular* thing that will precipitate the most meaningful change. Start with the biggest picture, 'someday' goal for your risk management program; each subsequent step will work backward up the hierarchy, building to achieve that ultimate goal.

To identify the most critical risk-related ONE thing you'll focus on, identify a big-picture, strategic goal for your program. Some examples could be:

- Our risk management program will inspire the confidence we need to take the significant risks necessary to advance our mission.
- Our risk management program will thrive to the degree that we will be able to self-insure all of our risks.

Next, identify five-year and one-year goals for your risk function. For example:

- We will actively evolve our risk management capabilities by providing training and support to staff teams up and down and across the organization.
- Our staff risk management committee will be the highest valued staff team with a waiting list of members.
- Our annual risk assessment process will reveal our most exceptional opportunities to embrace risk.

Continue by identifying the essential goal, strategy, tactic or area of focus for *right now*. Your "right now" could be this year, this month or this week. For example:

- Schedule a meeting with our insurance advisor (broker, agent or consultant) to discuss our new or evolving portfolio of programs and services, insurance market conditions, and our prospects for obtaining broader or less restrictive coverage in the year ahead.
- Design and schedule a focused workshop for our senior management team on our "risk appetite" or "risk tolerance."
- Facilitate a Risk Bow Tie workshop for a multidisciplinary staff team to teach staff how to "unpack" the potential risks that generate worry or concern.
- Develop a new framework for scoring risks based on Exposures and Readiness.

Don't get caught up in the planning fallacy: the tendency to underestimate the time it will take to complete a task or project. Connect the dots through each phase of your focused risk-plan and solidify a strategy to maintain the course and meet your objectives. If you need help settling on your "someday," five-year or "right now" risk priorities, please reach out to the NRMCM team! If you're an Affiliate Member, we can help you on a pro bono basis as part of our RISK Help offering. If you're not a member, let's discuss how we can design a short-term consulting engagement or workshop to meet your needs.

*Melanie Lockwood Herman is the Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your "ONE Thing" ideas for risk practice at your nonprofit! Contact her at [Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org](mailto:Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org) or 703.777.2504 to chat about Risk Goal Setting for the Now.*