Training Wheels

By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

Last week I wrote about the connection between riding a vintage motorcycle in less than perfect weather conditions and the fact that things worth doing aren't always easy to do. The feedback from readers led me to reflect on my first ride on a motorcycle: at the Motorcycle Safety Foundation's Basic RiderCourse℠. When I arrived for the weekend-long course, I was surprised to see real motorcycles in the parking lot where the course was being held. For some reason I had envisioned that I would be learning to ride on a bike with something akin to training wheels. I could not imagine staying upright on a motorcycle on the first go, without a safety net. But as I quickly discovered, one learns to ride a motorcycle by *riding a motorcycle*.

Many nonprofit employees find themselves in a similar situation. Instead of being given ample time to learn how to do the job they are asked to deliver, perform and execute on the very first day. We're expected to learn as we go. There are few if any opportunities to practice our jobs with a safety net; most nonprofit employees learn by doing. Your nonprofit's clients, customers and consumers need your help today. Their needs and wants can't wait for a steep learning curve.

Given the lack of apprenticeship roles in the nonprofit sector and the demand to "learn as you go," what's the key to protecting the safety of clients and your mission when employees are truly new on the job? I can't think of anything more important than training. And even your brightest staff need training to perform at a high level. Here are some tips for designing risk management training that will not only stick, but also provide the biggest bang for your training buck.

Risk Training Tips

- **Encourage staff to request training opportunities**. In many cases your staff will recognize their training needs long before you do. Invite all new hires to raise their hands (without fear of reprisal) for admitting that "I'd like to be trained on that!" Allowing staff to pretend that they know the rules of your road or how to address difficult issues is a recipe for poor performance and potential legal liability.
- **Incorporate more than one training format**. Some topics can be taught via online courses and webinars, while others are better presented in-person to allow for eye contact and interaction between the presenter and attendees. Make a commitment to supplement in-person training (the most costly form of training) with less costly options, such as webinars and online courses. But don't be penny wise and pound foolish by eliminating all in-person training. If you are training staff members on prohibited activities or other sensitive subjects, it is imperative to train in-person to increase understanding and

compliance.

- **Provide training on your key policies and procedures**. Handing a new employee a manual and telling them to “read it” isn’t training. Schedule training opportunities to review key policies, including “what to do if…” and which actions, behaviors and conduct are strictly forbidden. There are two sure ways to help staff members understand key policies: repetition and frequency. Review training on key policies often so your staff members will both remember and comply!
- **Customize training to your culture, environment, clients and programs**. Many of your staff will benefit from training on “best practice” topics. But whether you’re retaining an outside presenter or tapping an in-house expert, make certain that a portion of all training programs covers topics and issues that are highly specific to your mission and operations.

Let’s face it: training is fundamental to success on the job. And while the courses we took in high school or college provide a backdrop for our work at nonprofit organizations, none fully prepared us for the job we are doing today. On the job training is essential to mission fulfillment. And when you provide high quality risk and safety training to your staff, you’re doing more than investing in great performance. You’re investing in the safety and welfare of your clients, consumers and participants, as well as the well-being of your nonprofit’s mission. It’s time to put the “training wheels” back on the risk management program in your nonprofit and reinvest in the people that bring your mission to life.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your ideas about any risk management topic, suggestions for best-in-class risk management, and questions about the Center’s resources at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504. The Center provides risk management tools and resources at www.https://nonprofitrisk.org/ and offers consulting assistance to organizations unwilling to leave their missions to chance.