

Unravel Risk Myths and Mysteries



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A recent conversation reminded me of the tendency to cling to myths and misconceptions about safety and the wide world of risk. Some of the risk-related myths I've heard from time to time include:

- **The world is becoming more dangerous:** Media reports of violence, tragic accidents, and familiar and less-known health risks lead many of us to believe that our world is increasingly more dangerous. In his article [“Is the World More Dangerous Now Than Ever,”](#) Eric Dietrich writes that “Violence is always newsworthy; peace is not,” and that “we tend to think that all the bad news is the *whole* truth.” In his terrific book, *How Risky Is It, Really?* former [Risk Summit](#) speaker David Ropeik describes the 13 factors that can make a risk seem more or less threatening than it truly is, and explains how our brains are hard-wired to “fear first and think second.”
- **The middle of the lane is the safest spot:** In his article, [“Why Do Motorcyclists Do That?!”](#) Canadian writer Jacob Black offers simple explanations for questions such as “Why don’t motorcycle riders ride in the centre of their lane?” I was reminded of the answer to this particular query while riding my 1964 Norton Electra last weekend: the greasy remains from dripping oil, fuel and coolant form a rusty, brown, continuous slick that appears prominently from the seat of motorcycle, but is almost invisible to automobile drivers. Black describes that center part of the lane as “a no man’s land for bikers,” because it is “slippery, and dangerous.” Check out Black’s article to find out why other “bizarre” biker behaviors are actually part of “a motorcyclist’s toolkit of safe riding techniques.”
- **Since you can’t completely control what volunteers do, a hands-off approach is best:** In Part 3 of their series, [“Myths of Volunteer Risk Management,”](#) Hal Denton and Fiona Lally explain that “Organizations can be and are held responsible for the actions of their volunteers, and are expected to reasonably foresee and address the risks associated with using them...” They continue by advising each organization to “identify who its agents/volunteers might be, what they do, and how they do it as part of assessing and managing risk.”
- **A competent risk manager can single-handedly tackle big and small exposures:** We explored this myth in an article titled “Dangerous Risk Management Myths and Untruths.” To learn more about why and how risk management is the ultimate team sport, see:
 - [Restructuring Risk Roles](#)
 - Our Affiliate Member webinar, [“Teamwork is Job One.”](#)
 - [Inspire True and Triumphant Teams](#)
 - [Person of Interest: Soliciting Insights from Staff In-the-Know](#)
- **You can’t teach an old dog new tricks:** Occasionally I hear comments about staffers from “my generation” that reflect this unfortunate expression which dates to a treatise on animal husbandry from the early 1500s! Believing that anyone is too old, too inexperienced or even too stubborn to learn is

dangerous to effective risk management in a nonprofit. In a *Harvard Business Review* article titled “What Millennials Want from a New Job,” the authors noted that “For all employees, opportunities to learn and grow... lead the list.” While I dislike and disagree with the “old dog” expression, I find some truth in the proverb “you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink” when it comes to workplace learning and professional development. For inspiration on ways to motivate professional development, goal setting, and achievement among your team, see [“4 Ways to Motivate Employees to Embrace Training,”](#) and [“3 Ways to Encourage Employees to Keep Learning.”](#)

Breaking down the myths and assumptions about risk management and safety can enable nonprofit teams to take on the most effective risk and safety initiatives, with team members buying in for the right—and real—reasons.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Melanie invites your thoughts about risk myths and misconceptions at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.