

Unstuck



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Have you ever been figuratively “stuck”? I have a hunch that the feeling of being stuck is something all humans experience at some time. And I’m pretty confident I experience that feeling as often as the nonprofit leader next door. For example, I love to read. But this Fall I found myself stuck in a reading rut. For reasons I could not explain I wasn’t able to finish a single book over a three month period. At first I looked for excuses and refused to admit I was in a rut. After all, one of my personal reading rules is that “you don’t have to finish every book you start.” But schlepping six half-read books in my briefcase made me feel guilty. In the end, it was the realization that these books had crisscrossed the country as paper weights that led to my resolve to finish... something.

Once I focused on getting “unstuck” I was able to finish three books in three days. The first was Michael Chabon’s novel, “Telegraph Avenue.” Although I found the dialogue difficult to understand and the plot even harder to follow, I persevered until the end. Next I picked up a guilty-pleasure paperback by Sidney Sheldon. With two novels out of the way, I fixed my attention on something a bit more practical, “On Writing,” by Stephen King. The subtitle of the book, “A Memoir on the Craft,” hints at the contents within. You won’t find characters like Carrie and Annie Wilkes taking center stage in this work of non-fiction. But they do make brief appearances as King shares tips about the craft of writing and takes the reader on his personal journey from school teacher to best-selling novelist. It’s been a long time since I’ve enjoyed a book so much. My standard criticism of autobiographies is that people who have interesting lives are not necessarily good writers. This cannot be said of the author of “On Writing.”

I found several of King’s pearls on writing perfectly applicable to the discipline of risk management. Here are my favorite words of wisdom from “On Writing” and my personal take on how to harvest these pearls to get your risk management efforts “unstuck.”

- **“Your job isn’t to find these ideas but to recognize them when they show up.”** This tip from King reminded me of the frustration that some risk champions experience when they engage reluctant colleagues in brainstorming activities to formulate a failsafe safety strategy. Instead of trying to invent new ideas, maybe we need to focus our attention on everyday events (even losses!) that offer valuable lessons. Several clients of mine have told me wonderful stories about how downside losses they were unable to prevent... led to bountiful gain in the form of stronger and more generous support from donors, or facing the need to finally shutter ineffective programs.
- **“I’m convinced that fear is at the root of most bad writing.”** Placing fear of litigation or “what

could go wrong” as the cornerstone of your risk management program won’t ensure success. And doing so won’t help your leaders make better decisions and build resilience in a world of inevitable uncertainty. Unfortunately, in so many cases fear leads to risk avoidance.

- **“Language does not always have to wear a tie and lace-up shoes.”** Last week I agreed to review a draft contract for one of our AFFILIATE members. The draft contained a lengthy, wordy paragraph about “gender and neuter” yet there were no “he” or “she” references in the contract! Choose simple, clear language to convey important messages about risk and safety.
- **“If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. If you don’t have time to read, you don’t have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that.”** This piece of advice was a perfect wake-up call for an avid but temporarily “stuck” reader. And it also reminded me that reading everything you can about risk management is a wonderful way to develop an understanding of what it could mean to your nonprofit. You may find that you disagree with some, or even most of what you read, but don’t stop. Keep looking for insights and ideas that you can adapt or redo to work in your world of uncertainty.

Feeling stuck doesn’t necessarily feel good. But if it inspires you to climb out of your rut, then the temporary feeling has an ultimate, rewarding upside.

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/](https://nonprofitrisk.org/) and offers [consulting assistance](#) to organizations unwilling to leave their missions to chance.