

You've Got a Friend in Me



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“When the road looks rough ahead, and you’re miles and miles from your nice warm bed... you just remember what your old pal said, ‘Boy, you’ve got a friend in me.’” – You’ve Got a Friend In Me, by Randy Newman (from the movie Toy Story)

In her article titled, “Do Your Friends Actually Like You,” Houston-based journalist Kate Murphy explores the fascinating subject of friendship. Citing research indicating that “only about half of perceived friendships are mutual,” and through interviews with friendship experts, Murphy artfully explores the means and meaning of friendship.

Several insights from the article seem especially compelling and potentially useful for those of us focused on the intersection of human behavior and risk in nonprofit workplaces. I finished the article with four specific insights that I believe have wonderful relevance for leaders committed to creating best-in-class, risk-aware workplaces.

Friendship Lessons

1. **Appreciate friendship for its own sake** – An early insight in Murphy’s article comes from Princeton Philosophy professor Alexander Nehamas, who describes friendship as something that must be ‘appreciated for its own sake.’ This reference reminded me of a quintessential challenge of championing risk management initiatives. Many nonprofit leaders will support risk management initiatives for the wrong reasons—only to check off a box, or to appease specific stakeholders (e.g., a funder or Board committee that inquired about the organization’s risk landscape). Similarly, many of us are finally inspired to conduct risk assessments in the wake of serious incidents. Risk initiatives motivated by desperation more than inspiration only induce artificial learning rather than lasting organizational change. It’s critical to reflect on the true benefits of risk management and—like friendship—to appreciate risk management for its own sake. Effective risk management enables nonprofit leaders to think differently about their decisions and to promote mission advancement and organizational sustainability in the face of endless uncertainty.
2. **Friendship can be defined differently** – In her article, Murphy states, “While there is no easy or agreed upon definition [of friendship], what friendships have in common is that they shape us and create other dimensions through which to see the world.” During the Center’s consulting engagements, our team has recognized that nonprofit leaders use vastly differing definitions of ‘risk,’ ‘risk management,’ and ‘enterprise risk management.’ We believe that to be effective, ‘risk management’ must be clearly defined and must promote a shared understanding amongst a nonprofit team; we also believe that ‘risk

management' may not be defined the same across the entire nonprofit sector. Just as friendship feels different to each individual, the beauty of risk management may lie in the eyes of the beholder. While your team builds an ERM program to anticipate strategy-level risks that threaten the sustainability of your mission, another nonprofit team might focus on hazard-based risk management to cultivate a safer environment for staff, volunteers and clients. Still others might establish risk management practices in order to promote thoughtful program planning and operational investments, or to foster an environment in which staff members feel comfortable learning and reflecting on past successes and failures. Rather than worrying too much about benchmarking your risk function-or your friendships-against those belonging to others, focus your energy on simply developing the best friends or risk function that you can have.

3. **One plus one may equal more than two** - Vassar College Professor Ronald Sharp says "It's not what someone can do for you, it's what the two of you become in each other's presence." This insight translates beautifully to relationships in the workplace. When two people with different world views and perspectives collaborate, the end result should be greater than what each could produce alone. I've witnessed this countless times as a participant in a collaboration involving team members from different generations, with diverse professional training, and teams composed of staff with varying tenures at a nonprofit. During Center-led Risk Assessments, we often learn of successful and failed workplace collaborations. We are privileged to be called upon to offer strategies to leverage collaboration and minimize unproductive conflict. Unfortunately, too many employees call on others for advice or assistance only when instructed to do so, rather than because they know that although it takes longer to collaborate, the result is richer.
4. **Understanding takes will and time** - Murphy writes that Professor Sharp defines a friend as "people you take the time to understand and allow to understand you." Whether it's stereotyping or discounting co-workers based on their age, experience level, or communications style, investments in understanding the people we work with have the potential to pay priceless dividends in risk management and other functions. I was recently asked by an HR director how to handle an employee who is viewed as a creepy and nosy eavesdropper by co-workers. She described this employee's tendency to hover outside a co-worker's office when the person they want to speak to is on the phone or in a meeting, rather than interrupt by knocking on a doorframe or speaking up. She explained her plan to 'take one for the team,' and tell the employee that his unappreciated, rude behavior must stop. As I listened, I wondered if instead of assuming the behavior was sinister, she should instead try to understand the person behind the behavior, or encourage each employee to first speak directly to their co-worker about how they prefer to be interrupted, before bringing the complaint to HR.

According to psychologist Robin I.M. Dunbar, our limited time and emotional capital means that we may only have 'five slots' for truly intense friendships. His research includes the identification of layers of friendship: from very close, intimate friends, to casual friends in which we invest minimal energy, to acquaintances.

Although the take-away from Dunbar's comment is that none of us has the capacity to have more than a few, close friends, another lesson is that workplace friendships require an ongoing investment. We can all be a little more thoughtful about how we invest our emotional capital, as well as our risk management efforts.

Resource:

["Do Your Friends Actually Like You?"](#) By Kate Murphy, The New York Times, August 6, 2016

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