

The Layover



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I generally dread flight layovers of more than an hour in duration. While many fellow frequent fliers seem to find comfort in a long layover believing it reduces the downside risk of a missed connection, I'd much rather sprint from one gate to the next than have to find somewhere to wait in between flights.

Last week, however, a two-hour layover in Houston offered an opportunity to restock my luggage with new reading material. One of the items I acquired at the newsstand was the latest issue of **Fast Company** (December 2012/January 2013). The cover of the issue promised "96 Lessons for 2013."

Five of the 96 nuggets for the New Year appealed to me as possible dual purpose lessons for enlightened risk leadership in the New Year. So, without discouraging you from checking out all 96, here are my five favorites.

1. **Overcommunicate, overcommunicate, overcommunicate** — According to Foursquare CEO Dennis Crowley, "Ideas go nowhere if they stay in your head. Everything has to be communicated to the people who execute on ideas." The lack of effective communication is a grim reaper for many risk management programs. In some cases leaders fail to communicate "why" and in other cases the explanation of "how" and "what" is lacking. I've been shouting "Communicate!" for a number of years now, but I think I now prefer Crowley's "Overcommunicate."
2. **Double-down on Culture** — According to Warby Parker's Co-CEO Neil Blumenthal, "You can't teach someone how to be superfriendly. We created an interview SWAT team that emphasizes company culture during the interviewing process." Blumenthal's statement reminds us that we need to both understand what constitutes a desired culture, and figure out better ways to vet prospective partners, employees and volunteers. Recently I've ditched some of my standard interview questions in favor of questions like "Do you like to laugh?" After 25+ years of hiring I've learned that there are some things you can teach, but others, like bringing a sense of humor to work every day, you cannot.
3. **Rewrite the Rules** — The Co-founder of Seventh Generation, Jeffrey Hollender, advises that leaders must "rewrite the rules" and resist the temptation to "...just create more exceptions to them." Few days pass when I'm not asked for help "tweaking" or "updating" risk management protocols to accommodate newly discovered "exceptions." While trying to be client-focused without being simply compliant, I gently suggest tossing out what isn't working and starting from a blank page. The most effective risk champions refuse to fear a blank screen or blank page. It's not only ok to start or re-start from scratch, in so many cases it's the first step in reviving a sleeping and ineffective risk management program.
4. **Focus on Collisions** — "Innovation is often the result of random conversations—collisions—where ideas outside your industry are applied to your own. We want to accelerate those collisions among people," says Tony Hsien, CEO of Zappos. In risk management we generally try to avoid collisions! And in the

nonprofit sector some of us are obsessed with finding benchmarking data and case studies that feature similarly sized, mission-focused *nonprofit* organizations. Maybe Hsien is right and we need to look for ways to increase the opportunity to “collide” with unfamiliar, even foreign ideas, including those that require a mind-stretch to adapt to our world. Last weekend I read a fascinating study involving Fortune 500 companies with median annual revenues of \$32 Billion. Had I understood the size of the study participants before becoming engrossed in the study, I might have discounted the entire piece as irrelevant to the large nonprofits the Center serves—none of which have anything nearing \$32 Billion in annual revenues.

5. **Forget Outcomes** — “Real social progress isn’t achieved through plans or predictions. It’s achieved by keeping our systems open to new ideas and opinions,” says Alex Bogusky, advertising industry veteran and partner in the company, Made Movement. Bogusky’s statement is a timely reminder to balance our desire to “plan our work and work our plans” with a commitment to being open to seize the unexpected opportunities that arise from risk-taking along the way. When we’re overly zealous about the strategies and tactics we believe will lead us to the final page of our strategic plan, we may miss the opportune short-cut or innovation that gets us to a better finish line, faster.

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