

The Greatest Risk of All



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“I’m only human
Of flesh and blood I’m made
Human
Born to make mistakes”

– *Human*, The Human League, © Universal Music Publishing Group, Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd., EMI Music Publishing.

Many leaders of leading nonprofits worry excessively about external threats: competing organizations, fickle institutional funders, increased government regulations, the unpredictable global economy, radical political changes, and the like. Yet the most serious threats to a nonprofit mission arise from the humanity of our workforce. After all, we’re only human. Avoiding conflict, burying mistakes and feeling apprehensive about risk-taking are familiar components of human DNA.

What’s the Risk of Being Human?

- **Conflict:** When we ignore conflicting opinions or work styles at the board table or in the staff work room, we may rob our nonprofits of the contributions of creative leaders.
- **Mistakes:** When we severely punish employees for their errors, we may inadvertently cause staff to bury their mistakes.
- **Risk Aversion:** When we allow fear to extinguish proposed action that is risky, but potentially mission-advancing, we fail to leverage our reputation and assets.

Don’t Eliminate the Greatest Risk

If the greatest risk facing your nonprofit is its human DNA, how can you manage human nature? Here are a few strategies to consider:

- **Embrace Conflict:** Identify examples of unresolved conflict in your nonprofit and reflect on the consequences. What toll has conflict avoidance taken on your mission? Have high-performing staff or volunteer leaders walked away in frustration? Acknowledge that conflict is normal. Instead of pretending that everyone agrees, dig deep to find the wisdom in disagreement. Applaud the team member who has the courage to say “I disagree, and here’s why,” when everyone else has voted “yes.”

- **Bring Mistakes to the Surface:** Unearth mistakes and face them head on. Provide a comfortable space in which to step up and fess up to a mistake. Is that comfortable space consistent in the divisions, departments or functions of your nonprofit? How might you reward staff who bring errors, oversights or even wrongful assumptions to light?
- **Resolve to Take More Risk:** How often is a creative idea dismissed as “too risky?” Instead of allowing gut reactions or protests from your risk manager to stifle creative ideas, reflect on ways to encourage and inspire risk-taking.

You can check out some of our articles exploring HR risk and reward:

- [Creating an Effective Employee Handbook for Your Nonprofit](#)
- [Five Things That Should Never Appear in an Employee Handbook](#)
- [Grievance Procedures and Internal Dispute Resolution](#)
- [Happy Endings](#)
- [Human Resource Risks and the Forest of Fog](#)

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your comments about people and risk or your questions about the Center’s services at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504. The Center provides risk management resources at [www.https://nonprofitrisk.org/](https://nonprofitrisk.org/) and offers custom [consulting assistance](#) to organizations unwilling to leave their missions to chance.