

Taking Risks on FM Radio



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Nothing makes me feel older than when my daughter changes the radio station in the car and her choice of music makes me wince. The music on her preferred “hit music” stations generally strikes me as simplistic, absurdly repetitive and in some cases, mildly offensive.

But sometimes her choice is a pleasant surprise, and I find myself asking the name of the band. She is predictably exasperated when I don’t immediately recognize the artist and song title. Every once in a while she settles on a station playing a song I actually recognize. Before we can sit back, relax and enjoy the music, we try to figure out whether the song is familiar to me because it’s an oldie reinterpreted by a young pop star. While I love discovering a great new song, I also enjoy hearing new interpretations of familiar favorites.

During several recent consulting engagements, I’ve found myself reinterpreting familiar risk management advice to fit the modern context that is a backdrop for today’s nonprofit organization. The classic risk management strategy of activating a phone tree to alert stakeholders about a crisis has been replaced with multi-channel, automated broadcast messaging through email, SMS, voice, RSS, and social networks. The standard advice to strictly enforce workplace rules is displaced by my recommendation to take a nuanced look at the intersection of hard and fast rules and evolving workplace culture in order to fine tune policies that better suit the multigenerational workers who manage today’s nonprofit missions.

Save Your Best Traditions

Celebrating long-standing traditions while being open to new strategies may be the best approach. When your knee jerk reaction is to skip over the popular music stations, you may be missing a clever new song, talented young performer, or interesting interpretation of a classic melody.

Here are a few risk management traditions worth preserving:

- **Take time from the steady pace of work for team-building.** Effective leaders know that you don’t form a team by insisting that professional colleagues work together. A real team comes together when members learn to trust and depend on one-another. And even a group of talented, smart employees need incentives and coaching to work together as one.
- **Create short-term task forces or committees to tackle special projects.** Form and reform teams and task forces for special, short-term projects. Invite staff to suggest new teams and work together

without being directed to do so.

- **Reduce and simplify.** Remember when letterhead was costly? In the old days there was a financial incentive to keep things to “one page.” Even though it’s cheap to communicate today, it’s not a bad idea to try to stick to a page or handful of bullet points when communicating key directions. Important messages that appear at the bottom of a document or email message may be overlooked.

Try Something New

- **Involve frontline staff on important task forces and committees.** It’s time to banish the practice of limiting workplace committees to members of the management team. Take a risk by forming groups made up of personnel with varying educational backgrounds, levels of authority, and supervisory experience. Involve those who receive services, as well as those who design and deliver services, on at least one committee.
- **Approach staff training and orientation as a two-way conversation.** Instead of allowing your frustration to grow when staff and volunteers veer off course from safety protocols, cancel the long-standing lecture-style safety orientation and design an interactive, two-way conversation that explores “why” as well as “what.” Include an exercise that tests the ability of staff to apply essential safety rules.
- **Banish the “need to know” constraint on communications.** While every nonprofit has some private and confidential information that must be protected, many leaders continue to impose an artificial “need to know” filter on information shared with staff, volunteers and the board. The cost of information sharing has never been cheaper. Be generous by sharing information that team members may want to know. Trust your staff to filter.

I’ve often heard that the most effective risk champions in the nonprofit sector wear “several hats” and bring multiple talents to the table. The role of risk leader requires great listening skills, analytical ability, curiosity, and coaching talent. But in addition to these and other talents and skills, the role of risk champion also requires openness to what’s new, what’s next, and what might happen to advance or impair the nonprofit’s ability to achieve its strategic objectives. Which means that while it’s important to appreciate the classic hits of yesteryear, you need to be open minded and game to the possibility of hearing a new favorite on the “hits” station on your FM dial.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Her favorite interpretation of a classic song is Dryden Mitchell’s version of The Cure song, “Friday I’m in Love.” She welcomes your recommendations about great music, 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.