

Stop Preaching to the Choir



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Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: Risk Assessment

During a recent [Risk Assessment](#), one of the senior leaders I spoke to was rather blunt in expressing doubt about the tangible benefits and ultimate value that a risk assessment would bring to the organization. Although I was grateful for his candor, his comments left me wondering whether his view might dampen the enthusiasm for the project that I sensed from others. A few weeks after that conversation, another leader in the same organization told me she had heard the skeptical leader touting the value of the process to a potential funder. The news caught me completely by surprise. What transpired to turn a doubter into a devotee?

I was reminded of this experience while reading Rick Nason's book, *It's Not Complicated: The Art and Science of Complexity in Business*. One of the insightful gems in the book is Professor Nason's advice to cultivate *weak links* in order to "allow your idea or thought to spread more widely and more rapidly." He writes:

"Building a network with people you have a strong connection with is often the equivalent of "preaching to the choir." You are unlikely to change their opinions or actions in a meaningful way that will influence the overall situation. Often the best connections are those that are outside your normal set of strong connections... Weak links, and especially new connections, introduce an idea to a new group, one that may not already have heard of a particular idea or issue. It is the equivalent of having a disease develop into a global pandemic through incidental contact with a stranger on an airplane flight. Unexpected and weak connections often produce key turning points and create emergence."

Most risk leaders are familiar with the [butterfly effect](#): the idea that small causes or conditions can have large effects and consequences. The term is most often used in a negative context: for example, extreme weather or the spread of a deadly virus. Nason points out the *upside* of the phenomenon and suggests that cultivating weak links is a powerful way to grow support for an idea. His advice is counterintuitive to how many risk teams or risk committees are formed. More typical is to begin the process of building support for evolving risk management capabilities by inviting, to a risk-themed gathering, team members who are openly enthusiastic.

7 Prompts to Identify Weak Links

Building your risk team with both risk champions and risk naysayers will help you 'kick the tires' on new risk strategies as well as gauge the reception of the team's ideas. If you're tasked with building support for risk management in your organization, consider the following questions to identify weak links: potential fertile ground to 'seed' support for your efforts.

1. Who has the most to lose if we aren't successful growing the organization?
2. Who is overly confident about our understanding of the environment in which we work?
3. Who is most likely to say, "I told you so"?
4. Who in the organization is most likely to believe that buying more insurance is the best strategy for managing risk?
5. Who is most likely to beg off when we schedule a risk assessment exercise because they are 'too busy putting out fires'?
6. Whose day-to-day work would be negatively impacted by a bad surprise?
7. Who regularly bemoans or eschews policy and process?

5 Nonstandard Risk Queries

Now that you've built your risk team with both risk champions and weak links, you'll need to find the most effective method of extracting organizational risk concerns from each individual. Team members who champion risk management—your self-proclaimed 'risk geeks'—will be eager to speak up and offer opinions. Likely they'll only need minor prompting by the set of usual suspect questions, such as: "what could go wrong?" and "what keeps you up at night?" However, you may need to alter the standard inquest when interviewing 'weak links.' Risk naysayers might be less forthcoming. Using questions that prompt more specific inquiries (such as the following) may be more effective in drawing out the risks that concern these team members:

1. What must go right this year for us to achieve our top strategic priorities?
2. What have we been dead wrong about in the past five years?
3. What are the key assumptions underpinning our current strategic priorities and goals?
4. What are some of the possible unintended consequences of achieving our top priorities?
5. Are we taking enough risk in order to achieve our strategic goals? Are we taking the right risks to achieve those goals?

3 Questions to Understand Your Changing Risk Landscape

Dwight D. Eisenhower is credited with saying "Plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." Although I don't agree that plans are *always* useless, I absolutely agree that the exercise of planning is often more valuable than the plans that result from the exercise. Some risk planning activities fall short because they are built to identify linear steps to achieve a preferred outcome. The truth is our organizations embrace and cope with risk in dynamic environments: developing and honing the skills to adapt to changing circumstances should be the goal versus creating a step-by-step plan that attempts to address every possible significant risk.

Rick Nason explains that "Adapting means developing a keen sense of how elements of the system are changing and trying new ideas to see how they work in the context of the shifting environment. Ultimately, adapting means changing along with the environment rather than trying to get the environment to change." How can risk leaders develop the 'keen sense' Nason refers to? One path is to ponder the following questions:

1. What prominent features or aspects of our landscape (the world in which we operate) are changing? How are they changing?
2. What are we doing to adapt to our changing landscape, circumstances, and environment?
3. What additional changes, capabilities, and understanding should we cultivate to ensure resilience when we face risks that are beyond our ability to control?

After answering these questions it's tempting to try to apply past risk evaluation 'templates.' After all, there's a reason even the most innovative nonprofits reuse and repeat various processes: familiarity breeds contentment. Simply put, human beings favor the familiar. Why 'reinvent the wheel'? There is a very real danger of using recycled risk management frameworks and strategies. Applying what worked in the past won't necessarily work in an environment that is increasingly unfamiliar. Professor Nason urges risk leaders to "continuously observe and react to patterns and trends rather than focus on a fixed target." This is sage, timely advice for nonprofit risk professionals who recognize the value of breaking free from the familiar.

While I may never know what caused the skeptic's 180 in my example above, the experience is proof that weak links can be transformed into project champions. Skeptics take time to mull over things, examine the facts, consider the details and play devil's advocate before putting their full faith behind something. Adding skeptical members to your risk team, therefore, is a powerful strategy to advance any nonprofit's risk management

aspirations and strategies.

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