

So Good



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Throughout my life I've shied away from buying items of clothing that prominently advertise a corporate brand. As a child I recall my father saying that if he were ever to purchase a shirt featuring a certain reptile emblem, he would immediately cut it off before wearing it. Clothes with brand names or logos on the front, bumper stickers advertising places or things, and dealership license-plate holders were, simply, uncouth.

But I'll never forget buying my first Life is Good® t-shirt. It was an earthy green color and featured a simple drawing of a coffee cup with an equally simple caption: "start me up." I loved the rock 'n roll inspiration and I really didn't mind that the company's name featured prominently on the shirt. I loved the combination of optimism, irony and simplicity in the shirt, not to mention its potential as a conversation-starter if I crossed paths with a fellow coffee-lover or fan of The Rolling Stones.

In their book, [*Life is Good: The Book*](#), company founders, authors, and brothers Bert and John Jacobs share wisdom from their childhood in the 1970s and entrepreneurial adventures at the clothing company they founded in 1989. One of the most powerful tips in the book is to learn how to transform "have to" tasks into "get to" moments. The brothers write that, "Where some may feel burdened by daily tasks and commitments ("have tos"), it's possible... to flick that mental light switch and turn them into "get tos." They explain that the "one little word choice (from have to get) represents a major mind shift that can help transform us from default pessimists into proactive optimists."

Too many risk management programs are founded on, or grounded in pessimism and fear of terrible "what ifs," instead a far more productive optimistic outlook. It's okay to ask, "what could go wrong?" but it's far better to anchor risk awareness and strategy-setting in mission-advancing, positive themes, such as:

- How can we increase the likelihood of achieving our goal to serve a more diverse clientele?
- What should we do to make sure that children in our care feel loved and protected?
- What plans should we put in place to improve the odds that our mission won't be in jeopardy when our CEO retires or moves on?
- What are the most compelling opportunities to replace our current principal funder/funding source if our request for continued support is denied?
- How can we increase the confidence of our stakeholders with respect to our ability to communicate clearly and effectively during a crisis?

In an early chapter of *Life is Good* the brothers share how they processed rejection during a time when they

were selling t-shirts from a minivan they called The Enterprise. Many of the people Bert and John invited to purchase t-shirts responded with a negative and emphatic: “no.” The brothers adopted a “no losing” outlook; “no” or “no thank you,” did not represent failure, but instead offered an opportunity to learn. They write, “When you try, you either succeed or you learn. In both, you win.”

If you step back from the frantic pace of your day-to-day, it’s easy to see that nonprofit service is nothing short of extraordinary. With all-volunteer boards, ambitious missions and the courage to change lives and communities, nonprofits inspire, transform and shape the wonderful world in which we all live. And the best news is that whether you are an employee, volunteer, or donor at a nonprofit, nothing on your task list is a “have to.” Each item, each crazy goal or aspiration, is a “get to.” The opportunity to serve others is an incalculable blessing.

As you consider the risks facing your nonprofit in the final months of this year or the years to come, remember to ground your work in unrestrained optimism. Anything is truly possible. From evolving your culture to one worthy of your mission, to strengthening youth protection or governance, harness the will, professional network and the inspiration you need to make your mission-fortifying plans a reality.

Melanie Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Melanie welcomes your questions about the role of optimism in risk management. She can be reached at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.