Make Mission Magic by Tidying Up



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During a short trip to Chicago last week I purchased an interesting book for the flight home: “The Life-changing Magic of Tidying Up,” by Marie Kondo. I was equally intrigued by–and skeptical of–the book’s promise to change my life.

Marie Kondo is a Japanese cleaning consultant who divides the task of tidying one’s home into two major tasks: 1. discarding, and 2. organizing. According to Kondo, you should not begin organizing your belongings until you have first discarded possessions that fail to “spark joy.”

While pondering ways to apply the author’s tidying strategies to my home tidying routine, I was struck by the book’s simple messages and their eerie relevance to my work with complex entities. Although it sounds like a bit of a stretch, I think Kondo’s book on tidying offers a handful of crossover lessons for entity leaders striving to sustain high-performing, forward-moving, mission-driven organizations. I found three lessons to be especially relevant:

- **Less is More** – Kondo helps her overwhelmed clients reduce the volume of their material possessions as a first step to decluttering their homes. While conducting Risk Assessments for our clients, we are often surprised to discover voluminous employee handbooks, byzantine bylaws, and convoluted volunteer policies. A key task in any risk engagement with the Center is cleaning up the unnecessary clutter and confusion in these important documents. Our team finds (or creates) clarity amongst the chaos. Tuning up and paring back are critical steps to ensure that the mission of a public entity rests on a stable, affirming and hazard-free foundation.
- **They Can’t Take That Away From You** – Kondo explains that clutter overwhelms the lives of her clients. Many people fear parting with their enormous collections of personal mementos, photos, and even outdated or ill-fitting clothing. Why? According to Kondo, the fear of discarding or donating stuff is linked to the mistaken belief that the memories associated with our physical possessions will dissipate when the items are no longer around. Kondo reminds her readers that cherished memories remain imprinted in our brains forever. Donating or discarding a souvenir from a long-ago vacation or paring down a collection of books at the entity’s headquarters can’t eradicate the joy, pleasure or memories associated with these tangible objects.
- **Find the Joy** – One of the central themes in “The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up,” is that objects that provide or inspire joy should be kept and cared for. Anything that fails to meet this simple test should be discarded or donated. All public entity missions are founded on duty and service, yet over time we allow some of that to be suffocated by complicated organizational structures, dampened by fear of legal

liability, and extinguished by the pressure to do more with less. During my nearly 20-year career as a risk advisor to nonprofit leadership teams, I've repeatedly witnessed the reluctance to let go of long-standing rules, policies and practices. To restore and celebrate the joy in your mission, make a commitment to tidy up your organizational structure, written policies, and operational practices. "We've always done it this way" leads to organizational clutter and is simply not a good enough reason to continue using a policy or doing something that fails to produce a tangible, mission-advancing benefit.

I am not qualified to offer advice on how to tidy one's living space. However, for many years now my team at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center has helped countless public entity and nonprofit leadership teams tidy up the policies, practices and structures that burden their missions. If you're looking for inspiration for the former, check out Kondo's best-selling book. If you need practical help with the latter, give us a call.

Melanie Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center and welcomes questions about tidying your mission or risk management program at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.