

Let's Get Lost



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“To dare is to lose one’s footing momentarily. Not to dare is to lose oneself.” – Soren Aabye Kierkegaard

On Friday night I began reading a book called [Crashing Through](#), by Robert Kurson. The book is about the life of Mike May. At the age of three, May was blinded in a chemical explosion that almost took his life. With the encouragement and support of his extraordinary, determined mother, May refused to let his disability define his life.

As a child May epitomized a “can-do” attitude. Although he was assigned responsibility for some share of the household chores, May’s sister thought he “got off easy.” When she complained to their mother, May’s mother expressed her view that one needed to be able to see to vacuum. May proved her wrong and with practice and experimentation, added vacuuming to his chore list. He was also determined to ride a bicycle. At one point his supportive but understandably nervous mother allowed him to ride his bike to downtown Walnut Creek—a distance of three miles. When he returned after three hours she resisted the urge tell him how worried she had been. Kurson writes,

To go where Mike wanted to go—which was everywhere—one had to be willing to get lost, a terrifying prospect to many blind people. To May, getting lost was the best part. He told people, “I’m very curious. So getting lost doesn’t feel like a bad thing. It’s part of the process of discovering things.”

Many nonprofit leaders crave predictability and are drawn to the comfort of a familiar process. Experimentation—and the prospect of bumping into things we did not expect—makes some of us nervous. And getting lost *on purpose* seems counterintuitive to the lessons from business school and the idea that leadership is about leading others out of the woods and away from danger. Our vision of an effective leader is the person boldly charting a path forward, and not the person wandering about a corn maze.

Yet a willingness to “get lost” and experiment in finding a “way out” may be just what is needed to survive and thrive in our increasingly competitive, results-driven nonprofit world.

In their article, “Why Leaders Don’t Learn From Success,” from the April 2011 of the *Harvard Business Review*, Harvard Business school faculty members Francesca Gino and Gary P. Pisano write that experimentation is “one way to test assumptions and theories about what is needed to achieve high levels of performance.” Their contrarian mantra about the importance of experimentation is “If it ain’t broke, experiment.”

Taking risks and experimenting seem to be a natural pairing. When I give workshops on risk management, I anticipate the look of surprise when I tell an audience to consider “taking more risks.” Leaders are often so caught up in the “minimizing risk” mindset that they fail to question whether their organizations are taking enough risk, and pushing past the artificial boundary of past experience to find a better path to mission fulfillment.

If things are going swimmingly (or not) in your nonprofit, ask:

- **Whether your leadership team is experimenting its way to better performance.** If not, what makes you uncomfortable about experimentation? What critical organization goals or ambitions warrant some experimentation?
- **Whether your nonprofit’s culture supports innovation and allows staff to “get lost”** on the path to the next great service innovation, fundraising strategy or volunteer recruitment tool. If not, what changes in messaging and performance management are required to inspire your staff to color outside the lines?

Abraham Lincoln said: “In the end, it’s not the years in your life that count. It’s the life in your years.” As you reflect on your experience “getting lost,” and you consider experimenting with new approaches, remember that in the long run your nonprofit won’t be valued for the number of years it existed, or the long tenure of your staff. The most important metric is the difference you made in the lives of those your nonprofit was created to serve. By focusing on the “life in your years” instead of the “years in your life” I hope you will be inspired to venture into unfamiliar territory and risk bumping into a few obstacles along the way.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your ideas about any risk management topic, feedback on this article 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.