

Lessons from the Laugh Track



By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: HR Risk and Employment Practices

Fans of television comedy are familiar with the concept of a laugh track—a soundtrack that consists of the chuckles of a live audience or sounds that have been created in the sound lab to resemble an audience having a heck of a good time.

As a fan of live comedy as well as televised sit-coms, I was delighted to receive the new edition of *Fast Company* (Issue 187, July/August 2014), featuring an interview with Comedy Central’s president Michele Ganeless. The article, titled “Funny Business,” takes comedy fans behind the white noise of the laugh track for a close-up look at the thought process behind a successful brand. Four particular pieces of advice made me think of risk management while also making me smile. Now *that’s* funny!

1. **Get out of the way** – When asked how she “finds and cultivates strong comedic voices,” Ganeless replies, “What we do is find unique talent, give them a platform to do their thing, and kind of get out of the way.” What timeless advice for leaders hoping to cultivate risk champions in a public entity, or inspire an ERM team or even a board-level risk oversight committee. A too common mistake made by entity heads is to create a risk team but hang on tight to its agenda and process. Trust the people who believe in your mission and success, let go and get out of the way.
2. **Talk to your audience** – According to Ganeless, an important reason for the success of many Comedy Central shows is the network’s obsessive focus with its audience. She explains that, “...by the time we have heard a pitch, seen a script, heard the concepts, watched the roughs, seen the pilot, we have a sense of whether it’s going to work.” Trying to grow and sustain the risk function at your entity? Start with the stakeholders of your entity and resolve to ask them what they want and value rather than telling them what they need.
3. **Don’t confuse “how” and “what”** – When asked about the network’s growing portfolio of digital content and slick new iOS app featuring full episodes and stand-up comedy playlists, Ganeless explains that a major script change occurred when the leadership realized that “digital is just a piece of everything we do. So if you were working on digital marketing, well, you’re just doing marketing.” As risk management programs mature, some organization leaders spend too much time trying to parse operational risk management from enterprise risk management. At the Center we believe that although the focus and key players may differ if you’re focusing on strategy versus ground level risks, reflecting on risk and striving to make the best possible decisions in an environment of uncertainty is still, well, risk management.
4. **Fill your cup at the fountain of youth** – Comedy Central has a cool mentor program that matches junior-level and senior-level staff. What’s so hip about that? The comedic twist at the network is that the

junior members of each pairing are the wise mentors. According to Ganeless, what began as an attempt to “Help the old folks understand social media,” has become an invaluable way for staff throughout the organization to gain new insights into what people in the network’s target audience are talking about. How well does your entity understand the wants, needs and expectations of your young clients and volunteers? Are you listening to leaders “in the know” or discounting younger staff until they earn their dues or walk in your outdated shoes?

Anyone who has attended one of my workshops or worked with me on a risk consulting project knows that I like to laugh. So it shouldn’t surprise the readers of the *RISK eNews* to learn that I enjoy watching professional comedians and comedic actors find the funny bone in serious or mundane topics. I also enjoy learning (a lot) from people who know a lot more than me about a whole host of topics. Starting this week we’re pleased to welcome Alaina Rashid as a social media maven / Summer Intern. Alaina will be coaching me on the nuances of social media before she returns to complete high school in the fall.

If my foray into social media makes you laugh, then follow us on Twitter @nonprofitrisk for side-splitting updates about our conferences, cloud apps, and collaborations with leading nonprofits.

Melanie Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Melanie welcomes your questions about risk management and the Center’s consulting services and cloud applications. Melanie can be reached at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.