

Lessons from the Coop: The Sky is Falling!



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“To be wise is not to know particular facts but to know without excessive confidence or excessive cautiousness... (T)o both accumulate knowledge while remaining suspicious of it, and recognizing that much remains unknown, is to be wise.” — *Managing the Unexpected: Sustained Performance in a Complex World*, Karl E. Weick & Kathleen M. Sutcliffe

Picture this: it’s an idyllic day on the farm. Puffy white clouds are floating by, the warm air breezes lightly through, and in the background, the chickens cluck happily. My daughter skips happily to the coop with a tasty treat for her birds. But everything changes in an instant: an object hurtles into the coop, feathers are flying in a frantic scramble of wings, cheerful clucks have turned into shrill squawks, and there, amid the chaos, is... a cabbage. And if it wasn’t a cabbage, it could easily have been a handful of grapes, a slice of watermelon, or a fistful of cherry tomatoes. Any novel food introduced into the coop initiates the same “the sky is falling” reaction among the flock.

Chickens are risk-averse, mildly paranoid creatures. They are the closest living relatives to the Tyrannosaurus Rex, and yet, their level of suspicion for new food borders on irrational. The perpetuation of the species could be due in part to their unwillingness to make positive presumptions about any new or novel food source. Before accepting the alien object as edible, the whole flock must first thoroughly investigate. The pecking order is thrown out the window, each flock member pecks and probes the object before the new food is collectively deemed acceptable. We can draw a correlation to the way high reliability organizations (HROs) apply the second principle of sustained performance.

In Weick and Sutcliffe’s book *Managing the Unexpected: Sustained Performance in a Complex World*, the authors have analyzed how HROs thrive in continually changing and risky environments. Certain principles allow them to flourish despite the constant drumbeat of evolving and emerging risk events. Principle 2: **the reluctance to simplify** demands that risk leaders seek novelty, inspire creative solutions, and encourage participation across all levels.

Seek novelty, variety, and innovation and reject broad generalizations.

A cabbage is round, it might be green or purple, and its relative size is significant with respect to a chicken. All of these are generalizations that could lead to the flock drawing historical conclusions about the new item. However, these generalizations don’t answer questions about how the new item might benefit or harm the flock.

To fully vet it, additional probes must be explored, and from different perspectives, to arrive at an informed conclusion.

It is appealing to categorize risk, name risk, and apply historical knowledge to it. However, narrowing your focus on risk events to your understanding of familiar or similar events or circumstances may cause you to miss the nuances that make the emerging issue relevant and worthy of focus.

Foster a culture of skepticism.

Healthy skepticism challenges the status quo and will increase the likelihood that opportunities and challenges will be identified and discussed before they catch fire and become a crisis. That cabbage was a round object. Rather than accept that *all round objects* are safe food items, the flock rejected the generalization and was immediately skeptical upon discovering the anomaly.

As daily operations continue in your organization, encourage team members to point out things that occur out-of-the-norm. Fostering an organizational culture that applauds and normalizes the identification of emerging challenges and opportunities gives team members the confidence to make reports without fear of retaliation. Effective risk management should be an 'all-hands-on-deck' activity.

Take a fluid approach to risk teams.

One of the tactics that Weick and Sutcliffe explore in *Managing the Unexpected* is how HROs approach teamwork in relation to emergent situations. They suggest an ad hoc approach where teams are gathered on the fly, assess, discuss and act, and then dissolve once the risk event has passed.

Encouraging collaboration between team members encourages variety through different perspectives. Not only are risks and opportunities identified, but there is a higher chance that innovative solutions will emerge when different perspectives come together. And allowing teams to form and dissolve as the situations dictate not only gives the flexibility to pull in staff from a variety of functionalities, it also gives these teams permission to disband and move on to new priorities.

Nonprofit leaders who take great pride in remaining calm and cool in a crisis sometimes write-off the reactions of colleagues who are easily startled or alarmed by something out of the ordinary. Mission-driven nonprofits need both personality types—and many others in between—to capably consider and handle the risk events around the corner. And especially for those with years of experience in the trenches of risk management, remember to remind yourself that treating new concerns as 'old hat' is dangerous. Keep in mind that risks emerge for different reasons, including the external landscape that is always changing. The new coronavirus has become a global health crisis. While there are some similarities to the SARS outbreak of 2002, the world has changed rapidly in the last 18 years causing the *impact* of this new pathogen to affect us in a very different way. Resolve to approach risk with novelty—not with broad simplicity. It's entirely possible to examine and explore what's new and novel without getting your feathers in a ruffle.

For more on the topics addressed in this article, see these resources:

- [“A Spoonful of Skepticism Helps the Medicine Go Down,”](#) RISK eNews, Nonprofit Risk Management Center
- [“Foster Dissent, Quiet Consensus,”](#) RISK eNews, Nonprofit Risk Management Center
- [“Just My Cup of Team,”](#) RISK eNews, Nonprofit Risk Management Center
- [“Risk Management Advice: Smarts from the Streets,”](#) RISK eNews, Nonprofit Risk Management Center

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