Keep the End Zone in Sight

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As a devout fan of the Denver Broncos it has taken me some time to come to terms with the recent Super Bowl results. Thankfully, I've finally stopped lying awake at night wondering, "what if," and "what went wrong?" It's time to focus on the future.

What I've discovered in my first year at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center, is that many nonprofit leaders lie awake asking those same questions. And few days go by when we don't receive a call from a leader who is beyond the risk planning phase and completely immersed in damage control and crisis management.

Why is it that we wind up in "crisis mode" time and time again? One of the possible causes is the tendency to focus on the minute details of the risk game, while losing sight of the discipline's ultimate goal: *to inspire and sustain the confidence of the organization's stakeholders*. To counter that risky tendency, I've come up with four plays that will help you keep the end zone in sight.

1. **Think broadly about what could go terribly wrong, or wonderfully right**. When asked about risk, many leaders want to zoom in on a specific area of service or programming. Of course it's absolutely fine to take a close-up look at a program area that is troubling or exciting for any reason: rapid growth, high turnover, recent serious injury, ripe for a partnership, etc. But when you're looking for a receiver to catch your brilliant pass, don't get so focused that you miss the defensive end approaching your blind side.
2. **Remember the environment**. Downside and upside risks don't arise in a sterile environment. Potential mission-impacting threats and benefits differ in size and probability based on your nonprofit's environment. For example, a contract reviewed and signed with plenty of time before the deal expires is less likely to spell trouble than a contract hastily reviewed and executed. Some post-game pundits have said that the Broncos weren't able to communicate effectively due to the crowd noise at MetLife Stadium. What was the team thinking when it practiced its communication strategy?! When you ponder specific risks, always reflect on the environmental issues within and outside your control. For example, the risks in a classroom designed for toddlers are different from the risks that arise when you take the same group of kids on a field trip in a rented van. Therefore, plans for handling those risks should be quite different.
3. **Always have a Plan B in your uniform back pocket**. No nonprofit leader, however brilliant, can or should guarantee the safety of people, premises or financial assets. With that in mind, we all need a Plan B. In some cases, Plan B is a change of direction to make sure you still wind up with a win for the team. In other cases however, Plan B is the decision to cancel an event because you don't have adequate staffing or the weather has taken a turn for the worse.
4. **Above all, keep your cool and resist the urge to quickly assign blame**. You can't inspire confidence if you're falling apart at the seams or screaming at a subordinate who "dropped the ball." At

> the Center, we work with dedicated nonprofit leaders who must hold things together even when their missions are under attack. Our CEO, Melanie Herman, recently shared an email exchange that included a statement by a former Center board member, Felix Kloman, about how preparation can turn an unpleasant surprise into an opportunity. Within the full statement, Felix reminds his reader that being open to uncertainty has another benefit: "…the preparation for "surprises"—the acknowledgement that they are inevitable—may permit us to be able to step back from the immediate horror [of a crisis] and search for other responses [rather] than fear, panic and assignment of blame."

Why is quickly assigning blame so unproductive? Research shows that many, if not most accidents and mishaps, are due to the convergence of several factors. When we quickly assign blame we forego the opportunity to reflect on what has occurred and prepare for the next, "what if?" In nonprofit life, as in football, just because you dropped the ball doesn't mean you alone deserve blame for the loss.

Who knows, maybe someone associated with the Broncos will read this and see some wisdom they can apply to next year's season. With all due respect to the fans of those other NFL teams, I'm confident that next year, the players on my team will come home wearing those prized Super Bowl rings!

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