

It's Hard to Be Humble



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Confidence and leadership appear to go hand in hand. Effective leaders both project and inspire confidence. Since those responsible for risk management in a nonprofit organization are leaders it seems to follow that confidence should be part and parcel of every risk management effort. Yet according to business guru and author Robert H. Rosen, confidence must be tempered with humility. In his book [*Just Enough Anxiety: The Hidden Driver of Business Success*](#), Rosen writes, “Being humble involves admitting that you don’t know everything and not feeling like you have to know. It entails listening deeply to others and being eager to learn something new.”

Yet it is hard to be humble when we are called to lead and especially hard when we are asked to champion a complex organization’s understanding *and* treatment of critical risks. But perhaps *not* for the reason singer/songwriter Mac Davis cited in his musical tribute to humility: “It’s Hard to Be Humble.” According to Davis “...it’s hard to be humble when you’re perfect in every way.” The vantage point of the risk manager makes it hard, if not impossible, to see an organization as “perfect.” Like a muscle in the body, humility requires “exercise” to avoid its degeneration from lack of use. Maybe it’s hard to be humble about risk because we’re out of shape and out of practice.

Rosen’s definition of “humble” describes two ways to “exercise” our humility muscle. In my, uh humble opinion, these steps should be part of every risk manager’s exercise routine: (1) listening deeply, and (2) being eager to learn.

Listening deeply is not only a “foundation of great relationships,” it’s the appropriate starting point in understanding the nature of risk in your nonprofit. Rosen explains that listening deeply involves paying close attention to people, including “what they say and what they don’t say.” He adds, “...refrain from making quick judgments about people or their ideas. Give yourself time to obtain diverse views, explore new ideas, and weigh what you hear against your own perspective.”

Rosen links the concepts of surprise and learning when he writes, “And finally, you need to be open to surprises. Be ready to learn something new. Be willing to change your mind.”

Learning is fundamental to effective risk management. And risk managers have plentiful sources from which to learn, including losses, near misses, and every instance where taking a big risk paid a large, mission-advancing dividend. In a sidebar titled “How to Be a Teacher and a Learner” Rosen offers several reminders that seem

perfectly tailored to the world of risk management:

- Ask questions more often than you give answers.
- Be willing to not know.
- Cultivate curiosity.
- Learn something new every day.
- Let yourself be challenged, work through discomfort, and be open to new ways of doing things.

The concept of “confident humility” is one of many thought-provoking concepts in [Just Enough Anxiety](#). The book is a must-read resource for risk managers who serve organizations fueled by high-octane anxiety as well as those who serve nonprofits where anxiety, risk and change are too often avoided to the organization’s detriment.

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