

# It's About Time



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I recently succumbed to a barrage of ads and installed Blinkist on my phone. If you haven't heard, this app is a crib-notes tool for lovers of nonfiction audiobooks. The app distills a vast array of nonfiction books into 15-minute soundbites. The app's bold promise? To turn your unallocated time into "precious and rewarding moments for learning and reflection." While listening to the 'blink' of *The 3 Secrets to Effective Time Investment* by Elizabeth Grace Saunders, I instantly found myself relating these personal productivity tips to risk management.

Saunders starts by recognizing three truths and then developing complementary 'secrets' that leverage these truths and bolster support for being your most productive self. When applied to risk management, these same secrets might help reboot and refresh your risk practices.

## **Time Truth #1: Time is limited.**

No one can argue; there are 24 hours in a day, 7 days in a week (most of us allocate 5 days to the workweek), and 52 weeks in a year. To my knowledge, no one has invented a mechanism to give us what we all wish for—more time. And because time is finite, Saunders reminds us that we need to use it wisely.

## **Secret #1: Clarify action-based priorities.**

This secret translates well to risk management and the way that NRMC recommends nonprofit leaders approach the discipline. Saunders' choice of wording sums it up beautifully. *Clarify* (thoughtfully define) *action-based* (something you do!) *priorities* (circumstances, risks, or items that warrant "attention before competing alternatives").

This year, risk champions looking to jumpstart risk management should seek to make specific, actionable plans and prioritize according to the organization's mission. To define your priority items, ask:

- What can we see on the horizon that could bolster support in new ways or allow us to leverage recent progress?
- How fast do we feel like we need to achieve X?
- What energizes our team? What saps or strains our mission?

## **Time Truth #2: Reality always wins.**

Most people are time optimists. Rarely do we assess how much time it *actually* takes to accomplish what's important. But try as we might, we can't cheat the clock! Saunders reminds us that being unrealistic about time constraints increases stress and the feeling of being overwhelmed and decreases productivity. Her solution is secret #2.

### **Secret #2: Set realistic expectations.**

Nonprofit risk champions can help their organizations make achievable progress in managing threats and seizing opportunities by looking at the priorities set in the previous step and developing *realistic*, actionable milestones. If setting priorities uncovers a big picture of what your risk program is trying to achieve this year, this step breaks that down into smaller, achievable bite-sized chunks.

## **Time Truth #3: Habit patterns rule.**

Saunders makes the observation that when our guard is down or we're not at the top of our game, "our actions will follow the path of least resistance." Essentially, we turn to habitual behaviors. Nonprofit risk champions can help 'bake-in' risk awareness and risk-based decision making by following secret #3.

### **Secret #3: Strengthen simple routines.**

Creating simple routines that reinforce risk-awareness helps nonprofit teams fall back on muscle memory when disruptions occur. The two critical words in secret #3 are 'strengthen' and 'simple.' If you have a thriving risk management program, you likely already have risk routines. This year, pledge to take deliberate action to reinforce existing habits or to block out time to examine risk regularly.

Keep it simple!! A routine shouldn't be overly complicated or complex. The objective is to establish an easy habit that maintains the momentum to meet those realistic expectations in step 2. By repeating the routine daily, team members assimilate the risk routine, and the process becomes 'baked-in.'

The muscle memory built from strengthening simple routines is crucial to building organizational resilience and safeguarding your mission. Simple routines can become rote and offer control and balance when responding to the unexpected. Tom Robbins writes, "True stability results when presumed order and presumed disorder are balanced. A truly stable system expects the unexpected, is prepared to be disrupted, and waits to be transformed."

So how do you go about creating a simple routine? The process of creating routines should sound familiar. It mirrors a typical cycle: prepare, anticipate, practice, review, and readjust. I was surprised to find that there are two common barriers to establishing routines.

The first barrier, deciding when the routine will start, is logical. Any new practice could easily be derailed if it's not firmly established. However, Saunders identifies a second barrier—being apprehensive about what happens when all of the routine actions have been completed—to be just as crippling, especially when a newly established routine takes you outside of your comfort zone. If you're new to risk responsibility, wondering 'what happens next?' could dampen your enthusiasm for risk routines.

To firmly strengthen these simple routines, Saunders suggests anchoring new habits to familiar ones. For example, work out after having your morning coffee but before checking your email. Anchoring a new routine can help make it a seamless part of the day. She also recommends visualizing the process or sense of accomplishment after completing the routine. Visualization can be a potent inhibitor to the unknown as it can illustrate your organization's capabilities to address what comes next.

Elizabeth Saunders' truths are self-evident. Time is a limited resource, you cannot hide from reality, and habits die hard. Consider using Saunders' 3 secrets to bolster your risk vision and revive your organization's way of approaching the risks on your horizon.

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