

# Inspired at the Front Line



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**Resource Type:** Risk eNews

**Topic:** Governance

Front line leaders are key players in the delivery of programs and services in a nonprofit organization. With daily client contact, employees working in branch offices, chapters, local affiliates, community-based service sites or field offices work hard to bring the mission of a nonprofit to life. Those on the front lines of service delivery also have the potential to proactively protect *or* inadvertently jeopardize assets that are essential for mission advancement.

Simply preaching the necessity of risk management and sending formulaic requirements down the line to the local level is unlikely to work in the long-term. Without a clear understanding of *how* the risk management program supports local goals and interests, some local, branch or field office leaders will look for ways to work around what they perceive as a one-size-fits-all, authoritarian risk management program. In other cases requirements that seem compelling and clear at the Board or national risk management committee level may be as clear as mud when interpreted against the backdrop of a local unit's daily reality.

Instead of packaging strict rules and requirements at headquarters under the theory that managers at the top of the organizational chart "know best," commit to build risk assessment and risk management capabilities at the local level. Create a pipeline that sends creative ideas for managing in the face of risk *upstream*. Effective and sustainable risk management in an organization with community-based service delivery requires a commitment to nurture a risk aware culture at the front lines where risk-taking and risk management happen in real time, each and every day. The following tips may be helpful in getting started with a front line, upstream approach:

- Always solicit feedback on the potential impact of new risk policies before implementation. Encourage front line leaders to be creative and candid in identifying possible unintended, mission-eroding consequences of new policies or requirements.
- Consider testing any new risk management protocol in one or more offices, chapters or locations before implementing the program organization-wide. Collect and analyze test data to identify changes that will increase the odds of success when the roll out takes place.
- Ask local leaders what adaptations or adjustments they need to implement risk management policies and achieve the intended outcome (e.g., an internal control framework that considers the actual staffing of the local office instead of a typical staffing matrix).
- Encourage front line leaders to always take the time necessary to reflect on, share and learn from near-misses, accidents and mistakes, and resist the urge to attribute every mistake to "operator error."

Repeated requests for “success stories” from the front may send a signal that headquarters would prefer not to know about mistakes. A mistake under wraps or dressed in camouflage is not only hard to see but is also likely to happen again.

- Give generous credit and positive feedback to front line leaders who adapt and improve risk management programs or activities by customizing them to suit local needs and circumstances. Share examples of program adaptation throughout your network to encourage others to adapt and customize. Look for ways to inspire, rather than extinguish, creativity in your risk management program!

*Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your ideas about any risk management topic, feedback on this article and questions about the Center's resources at [Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org](mailto:Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org) or 703.777.3504. The Center provides risk management tools and resources at [www.https://nonprofitrisk.org/](https://nonprofitrisk.org/) and offers [consulting assistance](#) to organizations unwilling to leave their missions to chance.*