

How to Handle the One Thing That's Certain: Uncertainty



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What are the big issues your nonprofit's leaders worry about when they can't sleep? Racial and social justice? [Climate change](#)? Inflation and economic uncertainty? All of the above?

Does your nonprofit invest time to talk about these issues and potential ways to address them? Or do leaders move from one pressing day-to-day matter to the next, with worries unacknowledged?

If you're not talking about the big head-scratchers, now's the time to change that. Yes, uncertainty is hard. But, as a risk professional, you know nothing is certain. If you and your team create a container for your worries, and put some structure around potential ways to deal with them, your organization can begin to tease out potential paths and make thorny issues feel a little less insurmountable.

Here's how to begin.

How to Deal With Uncertainty

What are the big, scary issues you know your organization needs to deal with, but can't quite wrap your head around? Pick a couple that feel pressing. Set aside chunks of time at board or team meetings to discuss these issues. Use the time to sketch out a couple of potential scenarios on your topic, pause to reflect on the underlying conditions or circumstances, and brainstorm high-level ideas for how your organization could meet these threats or leverage the opportunities. This kind of scenario planning can help teams identify a path forward when threats feel chaotic or overwhelming and promising opportunities seem out of reach. Those skills pay dividends even if the specific risks you discussed don't arise.

Seek a variety of viewpoints. Welcome differences of opinion; they surface important information you need to know about the team and the organization. Don't expect to make a decision the day of your first discussion. Set a timeframe for when you expect to act.

Some questions to ask: What do you know about the issue? What don't you know that you need to find out to make good decisions on how to proceed? How can you learn it? Assign follow-up tasks as needed. You may want to take this opportunity to make a risk action plan.

Discuss these big issues at the start of your meetings. Leave minutes and routine business to meeting's end, so you talk about the big things when the majority of board or team members are present and fresh.

Bring It All Together

If your team fears uncertainty, work to shift how you talk about it as a leader, and how you respond when uncertainty surfaces for your team. With the complexity and rapid pace of change organizations face, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella has said his employees need to become "learn-it-alls," rather than "know-it-alls." Reassure your team that you don't expect them to know everything, and that you can find your way to the answers together.

No risk management team can anticipate all the complex issues a nonprofit faces in tumultuous times. Your team can best meet this moment by learning how to research issues and identify what needs more investigation and discussion versus what solutions can be tried quickly. The authors of ["6 Strategies for Leading Through Uncertainty"](#) in the Harvard Business Review note that solutions to today's complex challenges often require trial and error. Reward your team when they attempt something. If it succeeds, celebrate it. If it fails, learn from it. Taking that first step, and continuing to move forward even in confusing circumstances, is more important than the immediate outcome.

Done well, this work will not only move your team from worry to action, but it should also yield strategic ideas for the future. The more your team learns to talk about and face uncertainty, the more adept you will become at risk management.

As the great physicist Marie Curie said, "Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood."

Rachel Sams is a Consultant and Staff Writer at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She worries a lot, but finds that meditation, exercise and talking things out help. She'd love to hear how your organization deals with uncertainty. Reach her at 505-456-4045 or rachel@nonprofitrisk.org.