

HELP! I Need Somebody's Risk Help

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

If you've ever heard the catchy Beatles tune, *Help!*, it might have caused you to reflect on times you've sought help in your personal or professional life. Here at the Center, we offer RISK HELP and risk management guidance to our valued Affiliate Members and consulting clients. In today's RISK eNews, the Center's staff members wanted to spread risk awareness by sharing our personal favorite RISK HELP tips that we recently offered to our clients and Affiliates.

If your nonprofit team needs RISK HELP, then join our [Affiliate Membership Program](#)! Center Affiliates get exclusive access to unlimited RISK HELP by phone and email. Contact Whitney Thomey at Whitney@nonprofitrisk.org for more info.

If your team requires high-level, custom risk help or enterprise risk management solutions, then contact Melanie Herman at 703.777.3504 or melanie@nonprofitrisk.org to inquire about our consulting services.

RISK HELP Question #1: Does our nonprofit really need a CEO succession or transition plan?

Answered by Melanie Lockwood Herman, Executive Director

The Center strongly encourages the boards of staffed nonprofits to adopt a CEO Succession Plan. Whether your CEO is a hands-on manager and coach to a small, nimble team or a visionary atop a complex structure with many capable executives, something every mission can count on is that every CEO will eventually leave. To fortify your mission against the chaos that could ensue, draft a clear plan that includes:

- An introduction explaining the plan's purpose—to guide the elected and staff leaders in the days and weeks following notice of the CEO's departure
- An explanation of when and how key stakeholder groups will be notified—for example, will the board chair call large institutional donors? Will another staff person contact key vendors?
- A description of how the entire board will be engaged in the search for and selection of the nonprofit's next CEO
- Summary information on key institutional relationships, including funders and vendors

RISK HELP Question #2: We are looking for a new office manager. We have had a string of office managers leave after a short time on the job. How can we find someone who fits?

Answered by Kay Nakamura, Director of Client Solutions

Great question. There are costs associated with hiring a new employee including investment in time and resources, and the mental drain of the interview process on your employees. A poor hiring decision can set your organization on end and affect the momentum of your nonprofit. It is important to make a good investment upfront. Here are several tips you can take to make this experience positive for all involved.

- **Be reflective.** Do you still need someone to fill that role? Can those duties be shared among others? Confer with others in your organization who will interface with that employee. Those responsibilities may be able to be shared with several others, freeing payroll funds for other mission-critical work.
- **Do the legwork up front.** Brainstorm about all you expect of this employee and write it down. Be honest and make sure you include all skills and tasks. Gather feedback from others in the organization.
- **Use external resources.** Review job descriptions listed by other nonprofits. Read our book, “Staff Screening Notebook” for a 10-step screening process.
- **Be patient.** It is possible it will take time to find someone who is the right fit. Rushing to a decision will only put you back to square one with fewer resources, time, and patience.

RISK HELP Question #3: My boss just added ‘Risk Manager’ to my job description. But I don’t know where to start! How can the Center help?

Answered by Emily Stumhofer, former Staff Attorney & Project Manager

If you’ve suddenly been asked to wear the risk manager hat at your nonprofit, never fear—the Center is here! To get started, we often recommend conducting an informal internal risk assessment to start identifying and understanding the risks that your organization faces. With that information, you can start developing and implementing strategies to better manage some of your risks.

To get an internal risk assessment off the ground, start by inviting diverse colleagues to the conversation table. Recognize that everyone in your organization possesses a different vantage point from which to assess risks. As the new Risk Manager, it’s your job to help people candidly share their unique perspectives on risk, and to synthesize the distinct perspectives into a ‘big picture’ of your organization’s risk landscape.

RISK HELP Question #4: How important is it to check references when screening potential employees? Can I skip reference checks?

Answered by Erin Gloeckner, former Director of Consulting Services

Reference checking is easy to skip, but I believe it is the most important element of a comprehensive screening process. Reference checking is the only chance you have to glean insight from third parties—whereas other screening mechanisms can only gather information that the applicant wants to provide. It’s critical to validate what an applicant is telling you by speaking with references.

People are often tempted to skip reference checks because it’s tough to get quality information from some references. For example, a reference might be wary of providing comments due to concerns about defamation claims from the applicant. Try these two easy tips to make reference checking more effective:

- **Begin a reference check by qualifying the reference.** Ask the reference, “In what capacity did you know or work with the applicant? Did you supervise the applicant? Are you able to answer specific questions about the applicant’s work product, work ethic, workplace attitude, etc.?” Quell defamation concerns, by notifying the reference that the applicant gave you permission to confirm any and all information shared during the screening process. (NOTE: First ensure that your statement holds true; before contacting references, ask the applicant permission to confirm any and all information he or she has divulged.)
- **Rethink personal references.** Most people consider personal references inadequate when screening applicants for professional roles, but I think personal references have value. First, a personal reference may possess unique insights about an applicant. For example, Aunt Mary might reveal that she would never trust her nephew Josh to babysit her children. Maybe that’s a red flag that Josh shouldn’t be hired in a role involving supervision of youth. Second, personal references are probably less likely to fear defamation claims than professional references. Don’t be shy about calling Aunt Mary; she’s in the best position to ‘spill the beans.’

The NRMC team welcomes your feedback about this article at info@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.