Remember This

By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

"…who we are and what we do is fundamentally a function of what we remember." — Joshua Foer

It took a few pages ("locations" for Kindle readers) before I was fully committed to the book I'm reading this week, "Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything." It wasn't until I read that "the average person squanders about forty days a year compensating for things he or she has forgotten" that I *remembered* why the theme of this particularly book was both timely and personal. On Monday I confidently closed the locked front door of my home only to discover that I left my house and office keys sitting on the middle of the kitchen table. I had done the same thing less than two weeks ago.

When it happened the first time I attributed this time-wasting and frustration-inducing error to a minor lapse of forgetfulness. When it happened the second time over such a short period, I made a mental note to focus on improving my focus. Exploring Foer's insights on *regaining* the 40 (or more days) I'm at risk of "losing" this year seems a good place to begin.

Moonwalking with Einstein chronicles Foer's one-year experiment trying to improve his memory and train for a memory competition. His journey begins with a battery of tests conducted by a research lab at Florida State University. After his baseline ability to remember is measured, Foer begins working with a likeable memory coach, a Professor Higgins-like character who agrees to train Foer for competition.

Foer admits having previously thought of memory as something that operated "seamlessly" and discovering that there are mechanical aspects to memory and memorization, and that the skill of more effective memorization can be taught. He explains: "All of our memories are…bound together in a web of associations. This is not merely a metaphor, but a reflection of the brain's physical structure… A memory, at the most fundamental physiological level, is a pattern of connections between those neurons."

Last weekend I tried to help my teenage daughter prepare for a civics quiz by memorizing the names of our local elected officials. I suggested that she come up with an image for each elected county supervisor. For the official whose name rhymes with "futon" I suggested she imagine this leader sitting on a futon couch. She dismissed my strategy as silly and tried her own method, but when we began practicing our ability to recall the list, the official on the futon was the only name she remembered with ease. When I told my younger sister that I was reading a book about improving one's memory, she bragged this week that she has memorized her credit card numbers and expiration dates. I expressed polite awe, but mentally concluded that her accounting degree

and CPA status might deserve credit.

My daughter's ability to recall the name of the politician sitting on the futon, and my sister's recall of her credit card numbers are consistent with tips Foer received to improve his memory. The first tip is to associate memorable images or mind pictures with information you're trying to remember. This is effective because our brains are much better at remembering visual imagery than lists of words. The second tip is to apply the technique of "chunking"—"decreasing the number of items you have to remember by increasing the size of each item." Foer goes on to explain that chunking is in fact why credit card numbers and telephone numbers are grouped into "chunks" of numbers, making them easier to recall. Your credit card number in four digit "chunks" (1324, 5768, etc) is far easier to memorize than a string of 16 consecutive numbers, such as: 1324354657686978.

Of course while reading *Moonwalking* I wondered about the application of memory techniques to managing risk in a nonprofit organization. Here are a few ideas.

- Consider how to make important safety or policy information, easier to "remember" by presenting it in "chunks" rather than word-laden narratives. Those of you who prefer a list of bullet points over long paragraphs may be on to something!
- Explore ways to *creatively use imagery* to communicate vital risk information. Look for ways to transform what may be perceived as boring, into colorful images that are hard to forget.
- Use familiar, existing constructs or frameworks, such as a four-part mission statement, six step healing process, or the portfolio of property where services are delivered, to structure memorable risk management messages.
- Always strive to associate your sound risk management strategies with your mission, which is likely to be a compelling motivator for personnel. Risk management policies that appear to be disconnected from mission advancement will be less memorable, and more likely to be overlooked.

Foer writes that experts "use their memories to see the world differently. Over many years, they build up a bank of experience that shapes how they perceive new information." In essence, our perceptions about the present, including the risks we face in our nonprofit organizations, are interpreted in light of "past encounters like it." This is hopeful information for leaders of organizations that are in the early stages of a risk management journey.

As you take stock of your risk management programs and activities, I invite you to reflect on not only what you expect and require of personnel, but how you are helping your staff remember your requirements and expectations.

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 or 703.777.3504. The Center provides risk management tools and resources at www.https://nonprofitrisk.org/ and offers consulting assistance to organizations unwilling to leave their missions to chance.