Relish the Ride: Tap into Powerful Lessons to Manage Mission Risk

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Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

"I'm not a genius. I'm just a tremendous bundle of experience." – Buckminster Fuller

"Are we there yet?"

"Why is this taking so long?"

"If we hadn't hit traffic, we would be there already."

"We should have left earlier!"

If you've heard one of the above comments from a "Captain Obvious" riding in your car, you've experienced the frustration of someone unable to sit back and enjoy the ride. Just as passengers grow weary on journeys that are tedious or take longer than expected, many risk leaders grow frustrated when they can't point to tangible outcomes from the time, effort, and money they've spent on risk management.

It Really IS the Journey, Not the Destination

If any of the following goals appear on your risk agenda or in your position description, it may be time to step back and recalibrate.

1. Identifying all of the major risks we face at this time.
2. Ensuring we manage risk consistently across teams in a large, diverse, dispersed workforce.
3. Keeping our risk registers up-to-date.

I've heard countless risk professionals earnestly express versions of these unrealistic goals. The NRMC team gently cajoles our clients to put these aside for now—permanently, we hope—and focus on making progress on a risk learning journey. Three of our go-to, realistic goals for a nonprofit's risk journey are:

Changing how people feel about risk: It's instinctual to equate risk with danger. Yet our missions require that we take and embrace risk to achieve change. None of us know how things will turn out, and helping others understand that is one of the most important roles of a risk leader. But it's not enough to simply say "We think of positives as well as negatives when we think about risk." To truly change how people understand risk, we must use the term in a positive context. For example, ask “What big risks do you think we should take this year?”

Teaching people the nuanced nature of risk: At NRMC we love “unpacking” exercises that help people take time to pause and reflect after risk identification, allowing them to craft plausible, practical risk management strategies. We believe risk management happens every day and everywhere in a nonprofit. And when people understand the ‘what ifs’ in *their* realm, they will act in a way that protects the mission. We also believe in recognizing that teams in different functions or geographic areas may want to use different approaches to discuss and act on risk. And that’s more than ok! Supporting those variations sends the message that your risk management function is not an assembly line. The function exists to help people understand potential ‘what if’ events and use a risk-aware lens to build resilience.

Focusing on the foremost few: Identifying “every risk” or “most risks” your nonprofit faces is not worth the time it will take. And believing that you have done so creates a dangerous and false sense of security. You cannot identify—and describe in the fields of an Excel-based risk register—every ‘what if’ future event that could be highly disruptive to your mission. If you believe you can do this, go back to your register from late 2019; was “global pandemic” on your list? When you stop trying to identify every possible ‘what if’ future event, you free up time and space to focus on a handful of potentially mission-disrupting events or circumstances. That short list should be your risk list for this year. If it won’t fit on a single piece of paper or PowerPoint slide, your list is too long.

Celebrate Being and Learning Together

Throughout my childhood, my parents always found the time and saved the money to support a one-week summer vacation. Two of our favorite summer vacation spots were York Beach, Maine, and Lake Winnipesaukee, New Hampshire. My Dad always found a way to make those long car rides fun. One of his go-to car games was called “I Spy.” The game began with Dad saying, “I spy, with my little eye, something that is…. red!” My sisters and I would look out the windows of our Chevrolet Malibu (yeah, we had one of those cool woody wagons) and scan the scenery for something red. Whoever guessed the object my Dad had ‘spied’ would get the next turn.

Too often, nonprofit teams rush through the motions of a meeting agenda without finding the time to see or understand something new. For me, the most memorable meetings are places where ‘a-ha’ moments happen. Tightly scripted agendas leave little space to breathe, think, reflect, and learn. Meetings should be about learning, co-creation, and discovery. The next time you gather around an actual or virtual table to talk with a team about your worries, resist the urge to make a ‘to-do list’ with assignments. Use that precious time to listen and understand. Leave the meeting inspired to ponder and reflect on what you heard before making any plans to tackle those risks.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions about relishing the ride on your risk journey, or your stories about favorite vacation destinations at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703-777-3504.