Reality TV and Risk Management

By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

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When the first generation of reality TV programs debuted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I was appalled. The ratings for programs like *COPS* (1989) and MTV's *The Real World* (1992) seemed to validate claims that what Americans really wanted to see on TV was their fellow Americans behaving badly.

During the past two years either my brain has indeed turned to mush (as my mom predicted it would as far back as 1975), my taste threshold has plummeted, or the "quality" of reality TV has improved. For the first time in years, I actually look forward to the prime-time viewing period and weekly doses of shows like *American Idol*, *Dancing with the Stars*, *Project Runway* and *Skating with Celebrities*. My favorite programs have a talent contest as a common denominator.

As the current season of several of these shows drew to a close, I found myself trying to justify the countless hours I've spent watching *American Idol* contestants struggle with the audition process or *Project Runway* contestants agonize over design challenges, such as creating an outfit out of items available at a local florist.

One way to justify the investment I've made in the shows mentioned above is to extract a handful of practical lessons that can be served up to willing nonprofit leaders who have been contemplating risk management but who lack the confidence required to make it happen in their organizations.

Lessons From a Reality-TV Junkie

You Gotta Have Risk. Whether you're choreographing an ice-skating routine for a former Olympian and a professional female wrestler, or you're designing an educational program for underserved kids, there is no reward without risk. In stark contrast with the message sent by a number of insurance providers, effective risk management isn't about extracting risk from the equation. Focusing too much attention on eliminating risk increases the chance of program dilution, mission creep and other undesirable outcomes. Risks can and should be managed, but it's rarely necessary to focus on removing risk from the equation.

Too Much of a Good Thing *Is* Too Much. During several episodes of the BRAVO program *Project Runway*, amateur designer Santino was criticized by the panel of judges for "over-designing" his creations. There were

times when Santino's results, though interesting, simply had too much going on-beadwork, texture, five different fabrics, and a bizarre ruffle in the back. The judges felt that he had gone overboard with his design, thereby detracting from the overall appeal of an otherwise likeable and attractive garment. The same is true with the risk management and safety-oriented policies created by nonprofit organizations. What began as a workable Volunteer Handbook grows organically in some cases and through the magic of "copy and paste" technology into a treatise of unmanageable proportions. Many of the policy manuals I've been asked to review in recent years have included mention of every imaginable topic of interest to volunteers and subjects suited for another audience. If polysyllabic words and wordy policies were preferable, we'd simply evaluate the effectiveness of policies by clicking on the "word count" tool in our word processing program. But ruffles and flourishes aren't criteria by which policies are judged winners; the real test involves the ability of staff to understand, follow and enforce the organization's key policies.

It's All About Song Selection. If you've watched a single episode of *American Idol*, you'll recognize the most frequent criticism from the panel of judges: "It's all about song selection and I don't think that was the best song for you." In the risk management world the concept of "song selection" and the manner in which it's sung might refer to the appropriateness of the critical safety information to the nonprofit's program and the manner in which it's delivered. A nonprofit's zero tolerance policy for teen participants either fighting or using offensive language might be reprised through a prominent sign with large red lettering. Yet a thoughtfully written policy to explain the prohibition on out-of-program contact between adult staff and young service recipients might stand a better chance of being followed if accompanied by an in-person training session to emphasize its importance and explain its purpose. Careful selection of both the policy and the method or strategy of communicating the risk management rule is necessary to get the message across.

Do Your Own Thing. Another often-heard comment on *American Idol* is the admonition to "do your own thing." Contestants are frequently chastised for mimicking a popular singer or praised for presenting an original version or interpretation of a beloved song. When nonprofit leaders commit to integrating safety or risk management policies, from indemnification language in contracts to photo release forms, many aspire only to copy the forms used by other organizations. While a sample contract, application or policy statement may be a good starting point, another organization's policy is rarely suitable "as is." Like a popular song on *American Idol,* winning policies are those that are specifically interpreted to meet the needs of a particular nonprofit organization. It may feel "safe" to copy a policy used by another organization, but without customization to suit your style, culture, history and requirements, the policy may be go unheard or be rejected by the people required to comply.

There's no need to feel guilty about the guilty pleasure of reality TV. Buried somewhere in your favorite program, hiding behind the network hype, contestant humiliation and cheerful program hosts are practical lessons you can apply in the nonprofit you serve. Remember to look for these parables of wisdom next time you're cheering on your favorite bachelor, housemate, or celebrity ice skater.