

My Top Ten for 2010



By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

The beginning of a new year is a perfect time to pen a “top ten” list and this year I hope to combine my love of poetry with my job as a writer with a risk management beat. Admittedly the title for this piece isn’t poetry, but it does rhyme... which is a perfect lead-in for the first item on my list.

1. **Give Yourself Some Credit** – Whenever a nonprofit leader calls requesting help with their risk management program, I remind myself that the caller’s organization is already doing something (probably quite a few things!) to manage its risks. One of the most important services we provide as coaches and consultants is helping leaders identify and acknowledge existing efforts that work. I invite you to spend ten minutes identifying one or two strategies that paid off in 2009. What made them work? Who was responsible? How can the drivers of that success be replicated? Have you thanked the people who made the effort? If not, why not?

2. **Stop Procrastinating** – According to an article in *Psychology Today*, 20% of people identify themselves as “chronic procrastinators.” If you fall in this category, don’t despair. The article also notes that chronic procrastinators tend to be “more optimistic” than others! Procrastinators seem to be drawn to low-commitment distractions, such as checking email. Some even brag about how many emails they receive and/or respond to on an average day! Rather than returning your umpteenth email for the day, take care of #1 by thanking someone at your organization who provided leadership on a risk management initiative during 2009. See above. Finish reading this article first, of course.

3. **Read More, Kvetch Less** – My world seems to be made up of two types of people: (1) those who read as much as they can; and (2) those who wish they could read more and kvetch about their inability to do so. Read as much as possible and don’t limit your reading to a single method or genre. Read online, take a magazine to the gym, keep a stack of old-fashioned books at your bedside and on your desk, and carry your digital reading device wherever you go. Ask people you respect to name their favorite books², magazines and e-newsletters. Banish the phrase “I don’t have time to read...” from your vocabulary and send me a thank you (and a list of your favorite books) when you realize that this advice has changed your life for the better!

4. **Say More with Less** – Last month I received a conference announcement containing what I believe to be the world’s worst professional bio. I’d reprint it here for your amusement but even offering some of the worst phrases within the bio would provide enough information to locate the subject (and presumably author) of the bio. In addition to providing a reason to laugh out loud, the poorly written text was a terrific reminder about

convoluted writing. Working together we can improve clarity, banish jargon and make our nonprofit world a better place. Enough said.

5. Find a New Vantage Point – One of the themes I've written about recently is the importance of perspective. What you see depends, in part, on where you sit. While watching old episodes of the TV show *Supernanny* over the holidays I was reminded about getting down to a child's height when delivering verbal discipline or positive reinforcement. Important messages are easily lost in the space between the five-foot-six inch mom and the toddler. Communicating face-to-face is more effective, according to the wise "supernanny." Where are you when you communicate risk management goals, requirements and policies to key staff and volunteers? Seated safely behind your desk, or in the trenches, elbow to elbow with the people who need to understand and follow your lead? Look for ways to change your vantage point to improve not only your view, but the opportunity to transform information dissemination into a two-way exchange.

6. Ask Again, and You Shall Receive – From time to time I hear colleagues complaining about what they haven't received from a co-worker or vendor. And occasionally I receive an email from someone who is upset that I haven't replied to a prior message. These instances remind me of an important lesson I learned from my first boss: if you want or need something from someone, it's your job to get it. No one "owes" you a return call. If it's important, try, try again.

7. Try Something New, Avoid Something Old – A new year is more than an excuse to allow the errors of the past to fade, it's a chance to try something new. Identify ONE new risk communication technique, risk management policy, or risk-related training you want to try in 2010. Consult with a diverse group of stakeholders before finalizing your plan, and give it a try. Next, identify ONE strategy that didn't work in 2009 that you will NOT be repeating this year. Pen a reminder note and add it to the ring around your computer monitor.

8. Remember to Sell Your Ideas – Ben Feldman (described by one writer as "the late, great insurance salesman,") said, "Most people buy not because they believe, but because the salesman believes." A surefire way to diminish the potential benefit of a risk management policy is to preface its unveiling with: "Our lawyer/insurance company/risk manager is requiring that we do the following effective immediately..." Before blaming your choice of professional wet blanket and claiming the devil made you do it, consider how the new rule or requirement will help your nonprofit advance its mission. Discard the instinct to blame and describe the new policy with your vital mission in mind.

9. Look for Insight and Inspiration – Many of the articles I write are inspired by personal experiences, interactions with family members and respected colleagues, and the reading material that threatens to bury me both at work and at home. There is no single path to inspiration. I encourage you to look everywhere for inspiration for your risk management efforts. From near misses in your volunteer program to your peculiar hobbies and busy social life, you'll find experiences that will inform and shape your view of risk and how best to cope with uncertainty in your nonprofit.

10. Dream Big and Expand Your Reach – The best part of your job as a risk manager is the opportunity it provides to think big about the organization you serve. What big risk(s) could your organization take in 2010 to advance your mission of serving people in need, protecting the environment, or motivating young people? Don't limit your risk management agenda for the year to mopping up spills, filling out forms and negotiating lower deductibles for your insurance coverage. Expand your reach by asking others for help and by engaging them in your risk management crusade. Your reach is limited when yours are the only arms stretched out. Resolve to involve a growing team of risk management champions in your journey this year.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your feedback on this article and questions about the NRMC's resources at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.