No Worries: Mastering Productive Worry



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It's been nearly 15 years since I first heard the expression "no worries" during a trip to Australia. I recall feeling a bit confused when my "thank you" was met with an enthusiastic "No worries!" But as my trip continued, I appreciated the sentiment that seemed to accompany the phrase. By the time I boarded my flight home, I was hooked on the expression. I've since noticed many Americans use the Aussie expression as an alternative to "you're welcome."

In his book *Just Enough Anxiety*, author and clinical psychologist Bob Rosen describes a level of discomfort that actually motivates people to higher performance. In Rosen's view, leaders who create "just enough anxiety" in their organizations motivate team members because they tell the truth about the present, while maintaining an optimistic view of the future. This approach, according to Rosen, produces just enough anxiety to encourage the organization to flourish in an environment of uncertainty. Rosen posits that leaders who achieve this ask hard questions, admit mistakes and are responsive to new ideas, all while establishing a balance between growth and safety. They are also skilled in "realistic optimism, constructive impatience and confident humility."

Risk management looks at the benefits of pursuing opportunities as well as the potential downsides of decisions and the need for credible contingency plans. You cannot manage risks by hiding past mistakes, denying uncomfortable realities or succumbing to anxiety. Enlightened risk taking and risk-aware decision-making require awareness of the potential downsides of a new program or approach, thoughtful planning for positive outcomes, and strategizing for as soft a landing as possible when a venture doesn't work out as planned.

In *Worrying: A Literary and Cultural History*, Francis O'Gorman explains, "Worry's favorite shape is a circle." He adds that although the "chains of cause-and-effect" may appear to be straight lines, they're actually loops. I find it interesting that some risk leaders depict their risk management processes in a linear fashion, while others understand those processes as a loop. The linear diagrams offer a comforting end–the denouement. Risk management processes depicted in a circle or cycle might cause worry; they never end, reminding us that pondering alternate futures and developing credible contingency plans is in fact, a continuous loop. You have entered the risk management Twilight Zone!

O'Gorman informs his readers that the concept of worrying gained a foothold in fiction and self-help writing after World War I. "The self-help books and the novel writers found a place for worrying after the First World War. The novelists, particularly, developed vocabularies in which worry could be spoken about, represented,

dramatized, and even passed on." O'Gorman later reminds readers that "...it'd be wrong to think that worry became a subject for which there's a sophisticated critical vocabulary, an extensive literature, a range of theories, a choice of interpretations, a sequence of schools of thought."

Mastering Productive Worry and Anxiety

- **Start with the flipside.** Instead of focusing on 'what could go wrong,' start with 'what can we do to increase the odds of success?' Positive language can make people feel better, and makes many conversations more productive. Find quick inspiration for transforming your negative workplace language to positive in this post from Happify.
- **Envision your organization on a journey, not a ledge.** Few people enjoy being on edge, or teetering on the brink of the unknown. Many worries about risk in a nonprofit stem from the belief that the organization's reputation or sustainability are perched on a rocky ledge. The truth is that every nonprofit organization is on a journey, not a ledge. And the journey–likely to be long–will inevitably involve ups and downs. When you embrace the long view of your organization's life cycle, you offer your team stability and remove the frightening ledges or barriers to action and innovation.
- **Engage polar opposite personnel.** When worries are at their worst, it's comforting to be surrounded by like-minded souls who you can commiserate with. But that's not what you need to escape from sticky circumstances. You need the most diverse group you can assemble–colleagues with potentially polar opposite viewpoints.
- **Remain open to the radical.** One of the best ways to calm anxiety is to be open to a radically new approach to the problem. A simple or obvious answer is rarely the right path out of a complex situation. O'Gorman writes: "It's true, as far as I see it, that an idea can suddenly appear in my head and change how I perceive things. This is one of the extraordinary events of the ordinary life of our minds … It's one of the curious things about writing–sometimes even speaking–that sentences can end in ways we had never envisaged when we started them. There's a mystery about that and a kind of wonder. There is something similarly unknown, and wonderful, about where human beings go in their own minds and how we can change unexpectedly from within when an unbidden idea occurs to us though we have no idea where it came from or how it got there."
- **Look beneath the shiny outer layer.** In *Worrying: A Literary and Cultural History*, O'Gorman rounds his literary journey of worry with a reflection on how worry is perceived in modern times. "To think about worry now," he writes, "is to be an investigator of the known-yet-almost-unknown, of the paradoxically familiar but almost undiscussed. To think about worry is to look beneath often polished surfaces and probe layers of camouflage." Many risk issues facing nonprofits are hard to acknowledge; they are both the elephant in the room, and the dent in the smooth, polished exterior of a charitable mission. Give yourself permission to explore these issues fully and honestly, because like it or not, they are part of your organization's identity.

Whether your colleagues are consumed by worry or subscribe to the 'no worries' lifestyle, you can help shape workplace anxiety and stress into productive, motivating sentiments that move your mission forward without taking a toll on your treasured team.

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