

Choose Better Words to Fight Resistance to Risk



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When I was young, my parents encouraged us to make wise language choices. Cursing was verboten in our household and a stern look followed any use of crass terms, even common ones. Recently I've spoken to several risk leaders who feel they are fighting an uphill battle in their risk-focused work. They say things like:

- "People agree risk management is worthwhile, but they won't find time to participate in our risk assessment."
- "Instead of working with me on risk mitigation activities, some colleagues say they need to spend their limited time on mission-focused projects."

These recent conversations cement my belief that we need to *choose our words wisely* when we invite busy people to support the goals and activities of a risk management function. That includes taking the negative sting out of risk-focused tasks and activities. Here are a few ways to do that.

Invite colleagues to ponder possibilities, not risks. An invitation to brainstorm 'risks' may not sound like an uplifting way to spend the afternoon. But an invitation to ponder possibilities—the essence of risk—could attract a group bringing diverse points of view to the table. Risks are future, possible events, decisions or outcomes with a range of implications. A risk may or may not materialize; a risk is indeed a possibility.

Frame risk management as a set of capabilities that build resilience and readiness. Too many risk professionals introduce the "why" behind risk practice with language from the disciplines of compliance and ethics. "We have to do this because it is required by... law, funder, grant agreement, contract, accrediting body..." Choose any external institution to blame! A better lead-in is that "We're doing this exercise so we can be more resilient and prepared for ANYTHING that might happen." Or, "We're doing this because our mission has meaning: people depend on us and we need to be dependable." Few members of a devoted nonprofit team will wave off activities that infuse resilience and readiness into goals and programs that truly matter.

Be reasonable: ask for 3 minutes of time. How do you feel when asked to respond to a survey that will take 30, 60 or 90 minutes of your time? If you're in the presence of someone receiving this instruction you may hear an audible sigh or groan. If you're sending the survey by email, you're likely to hear crickets. When designing a survey, use the AI built into your survey software to shorten the questions and delete unnecessary questions until the system tells you the average response time is 3 minutes (or less). Keep in mind that satisfied survey takers are likely to respond "yes" to your follow-up survey if their experience with the first was painless.

Ask questions that inspire gut instinct answers. Many meaningful risk surveys never get finished because they contain questions that cause the survey taker to stumble. *What does this mean? What do they want me to say?* Several years ago an NRMCC colleague cautioned me about a ‘double-barreled’ question in a survey I created. A single question covered two topics; a survey taker might say ‘yes’ to the first part and ‘no’ to the second part. She showed me how to break the question down into two questions, or better yet, narrow the question to focus on one topic that would invite a single, clear unequivocal response.

There are few people who consistently choose the right words, every time. One of the potent lessons I learned from my parents is that understanding your audience is essential to proper word choice. Too often, we choose words that are familiar. To persuade busy people to support your risk work, start by reading the room. Choose the words you use with care and recognition of how those words will—or won’t—resonate with your audience. That may mean sometimes putting aside the most familiar terms (risk, risk management) and choosing new terms to express your risk-inspired mission and purpose.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your ideas and insights on word choice in the risk management discipline at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org and 703-777.3504.