

Into the Deep: Your Six-Week Risk Challenge (It's Not About Carbs)



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Collecting data (what keeps you up at night?), sorting data (let's sort these risks by likelihood and impact scores), and promising protection (here's a list of all the things we're doing to mitigate our risks) are famously familiar tasks in risk management. If you include the time asking, pleading and reminding colleagues to complete your risk survey, the workload for these seemingly simple tasks begins to add up. And don't forget to include the hours spent massaging risk reports to exude confidence instead of frustration and vulnerability.

What would happen if we completely re-imagined the risk function as one focused on truly understanding—without judgment—the worries that team members express or keep to themselves? What if, instead of asking people to score named risks based on wild guesses about likelihood and impact, we responded with curiosity by asking them questions:

- Can you imagine why or how that might happen? What are some possible scenarios or pathways?
- What underlying causes or conditions could intersect or spiral to result in that risk?
- How might that possibility play out? If it did happen, what would you or others do in response?
- How are we well prepared for that risk? In what ways do you feel vulnerable and unprepared?
- What plans or preparation would make those first steps clearer or easier to take?
- Is the juice (avoiding the disruptive impacts of the risk; being prepared in the face of risk) potentially worth the squeeze (the effort to plan and prepare), in your view?

If you're wondering whether questions such as these could turn a 'simple' risk questionnaire into a monstrous survey that would never be completed, you're right. That's why these questions are not suited for surveys. Spoiler alert: going beneath the surface of a significant risk to understand risk nuances and elevate mission success cannot be accomplished in a survey, simple or otherwise.

Receptivity + Curiosity: Essentials for Trusting Conversations

To go beneath the surface of your nonprofit's top risks (possibilities), ground yourself in receptivity. In his book *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*, David Brooks writes that "Being receptive means overcoming insecurities and self-pre-occupation and opening yourself up to the experience of another. It means you resist the urge to project your own viewpoint; you do not ask, "How would I feel if I were in your shoes?" Instead, you are patiently ready for what the other person is offering."

If I'm being brutally honest, I struggle with receptivity. I'm often overcome by a feeling that people who ask me questions about risk want clear, succinct and confident answers. They are calling or asking because they hope I know. They expect I will know. My instinct is to meet them by saying, "This is what I've learned..." or "This is what I would do." But that advice is based on my own unique collection of life lessons in circumstances that may be far afield from what the caller faces. I often wonder whether my feedback has been truly helpful, or "thank you for your help" is simply a polite, pre-programmed response from someone worried they were interrupting a busy colleague.

Curiosity is a risk management superpower. It's far more valuable and precious than knowledge of state and federal laws (all accessible with Internet access and decent search skills), familiarity with well-known 'risk frameworks,' or the ability to efficiently sort risk data in a spreadsheet. Curiosity leads you to the deep, the heart of the matter, the exciting opportunity to understand possibilities and build true resilience. In her book *I Never Thought of It That Way*, Monica Guzman writes that "What am I missing?" is not just any question. It's the question. It's the doorstep to put down in the hallways of your mind, pathway after pathway, to keep open possibilities from slamming into harmful assumptions."

Together, receptivity to another's experience and perspective, and curiosity—your most powerful risk tool—can enable and bolster trusting conversations about the 'what ifs' of organizational life.

Six-Week Risk Quest

I want to challenge you to a risk resolution that doesn't require you to cut back on carbohydrates or eliminate a favorite treat from your diet. My challenge is an invitation to engage in at least one trusting, deep conversation about a critical risk every week for the next six weeks.

Your quest: to determine whether trusting conversations about risk can illuminate hidden or poorly understood causes and consequences, as well as promising and meaningful risk responses. A potential bonus: a deeper connection to the people who have bravely voiced concerns about your top risks.

First, identify 6 risks—future possibilities—that rise to the top in your recent risk work. Next, identify 6 people you believe might have a unique view, perspective or insights on those 6 risks. Don't cheat: if you're thinking one person has the deepest understanding of all 6 risks, think again. To accomplish this risk quest, you need to engage with a half-dozen unique humans. Now prep the questions and topics you'll delve into during these conversations, as well as your introduction. Here's a customizable conversation starter:

"During our time together, I want to hear and truly understand this risk from your perspective. I'm going to work hard not to interject my personal views and biases, and instead focus on learning and understanding your experience with this issue."

Here are some of the questions you might consider and adapt to suit your conversations:

- How would this risk potentially affect you? Affect the team you're working in?
- How might the risk affect other teams?
- If you were to build readiness for this possibility, knowing that it may never happen, what are some of the things you would do?
- If resource constraints were off the table, what would you do?
- If you knew everyone here would be supportive and help, what would you do?
- Can you think of ways that those actions would help us build resilience for other risks?

Rest and Reflect

At the end of your six week Risk Quest, put your notes aside for at least a week. After a week has passed, re-read your notes and reflect on what you heard. Consider using these question prompts to amplify reflection:

- The most surprising things I learned about the people I spoke to were...
- Aspects or angles of the risks that were new to me included...
- I see these risks differently in the following ways...
- My receptivity during these conversations grew week by week/stayed the same/declined...
- I attribute the change or lack of change in my receptivity to...

Your final task: reflect back what you learned. Decide what you will do differently as a result of these conversations. Share your reflections in follow-up conversations with the people who so bravely confided their thoughts, ideas and worries. This is not fodder for a breezy, nothing-to-see-here board risk report. This is an investment in your leadership, your team, and your nonprofit's future.