

Keep Calm and Carry on Embracing Possibilities



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“Possibilities are always more interesting than facts. We shouldn’t frown on fact, but our world is congested with them. But for every fact that becomes a fact, there are seven, eight, maybe five hundred possibilities hanging around in the background that didn’t make it in to the place where they could be elected and realised as the actual fact.” – John O’Donohue

In an article titled [“Leading Through Uncertainty.”](#) Lowell Bryan and Diana Farrell write about the urgency of overcoming “the paralysis that dooms any organization” and the uncertainty that leaves “some leaders lost in the fog.” They suggest that becoming more “flexible, aware, and resilient” will build organizational muscle key to both survival and seizing “the extraordinary opportunities that arise during periods of vast uncertainty.”

The article’s theme of managing through uncertainty is timeless. The authors conclude with the prediction that “The future will belong to companies whose senior executives remain calm, carefully assess their options, and nurture the flexibility, awareness, and resiliency needed to deal with whatever the world throws at them.”

So how do you stay calm to assess possibilities (risks) in an ever-more-stressful world? Here are some of NRMC’s favorite strategies.

How to Stay Calm When A Colleague Is Anything But

Contrary to popular myth and misconception, the people who have accepted or been voluntold to manage risk are not professional doomsayers. To be an effective risk champion in a world of increasing volatility and uncertainty, you must stay calm, no matter what. To cultivate calm, ready yourself with a set of great questions that will help you understand and evaluate the risk in front of you. First, do not ask the concerned colleague to guess about the potential “likelihood” and “severity” of the risk or survey a team and average the scores (wild guesses).

Instead, when you’re asked, “what should we do about risk X or risk Y,” make sure you ask:

- Under what circumstances might that risk unfold?
- What events or factors could increase the likelihood of that risk becoming reality?
- What are the possible consequences of that risk?
- In what ways are we well prepared to cope with the consequences of that risk?
- What practical steps or preparation could we take to be better prepared?

- If you could only do one thing to build resilience in the face of this potential risk, what would that be?
- What more do we need to know or understand to build readiness for this risk?
- Who would know a lot more than the two of us about the risk, or ways to build resilience?

How to Discern Possibilities Amid Pessimism

The naming of “top risks” often devolves into forecasts of disaster for a mission, a key project, or financial health. At NRMCM we agree with the philosopher John O’Donoghue’s observation that “possibilities” (risks!) are “more interesting than facts.” We strongly advise nonprofit teams to ponder possibilities and plan accordingly. For example, instead of preparing for the loss of our #1 funder due to a scandal involving a former/current leader, consider:

- Strategies to build resilience in the face of a shortfall in revenues from any cause (e.g., demand declines, funder non-renews, strong prospect walks away, family challenges bequest, and so on).

And instead of preparing for the sudden departure of a specific member of the executive team, consider:

- Strategies to build a culture of succession planning, leadership development and cross training across the organization, so we’re resilient in the face of any expected or unexpected departure.

Instead of preparing for a ransomware attack by a cybercriminal syndicate based in a far-off country, consider:

- What we would do immediately if any core systems we rely on were unavailable for any reason.

Finding possibilities within pessimistic worries might also involve asking: How might an event such as this one make us stronger and more effective in the long run? What are some of the lessons we could learn by experiencing this risk? Are there other ways to learn those lessons without experiencing the risk?

In “Leading with the Head and Heart: The Modern Leader Our World Needs Today,” in *Certain Uncertainty*, Kristin Ferguson describes four attributes of modern leaders who lead with the heart. These attributes are a wonderful call to action for risk professionals. As you lead others through difficult conversations about risk against an uncertain, volatile backdrop, remember to stay calm and lean on these attributes:

- **Humility:** Be eager, not just willing, to seek out the contributions of others, accept that many things are beyond your organization’s control, and resist the urge to prove your expertise or be “the smartest person in the room.”
- **Self-Awareness:** Resolve to develop a deeper sense of your character, abilities, and limitations. Be always appreciative and aware of the impact you have on those around you; continually adapt your leadership style to meet the challenges and changing environment.
- **Courage:** Make decisions and take action that you believe is “the right thing to do, even in the face of pressure from others not to do so.” Work to create psychologically safe spaces where others in your nonprofit feel able to speak up.
- **Empathy:** Put yourself in the shoes of others without taking on others’ feelings. Remember that you can “willingly, authentically, and respectfully listen and engage with diverse points of view and recognize it is in those differences where value lies.”

What a beautiful sentiment—that engaging empathy can make you more calm, not less. You don’t have to take on the fears, doubts and grudges of everyone you talk to. You just need to understand where they’re coming from. To do that, listen and ask thoughtful questions. Staying calm can help you discern signal from noise to assess possibilities, lead colleagues through challenging risk discussions, and consider the best that might happen as well as the worst.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Her personal/professional goal is to learn something new every day. With each learning moment, the number of questions she wonders about keeps growing. Reach out to Melanie with your favorite risk or learning-related questions and queries at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703-777-3504.