# Learn, Don't Ruminate, About Past Disruptions



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"That could have been so much worse!" I replied to a friend telling me about his disrupted morning commute due to a tire sidewall failure on a busy highway. After the conversation ended, it occurred to me that perpetual positivity may not be my most appealing personality trait. Recently, while reading *Why We Remember*, I discovered that positivity bias tends to increase as we get older. Which led me to wonder whether I'll be insufferable before long. It also made me wonder whether years of experience is an immeasurable asset—or looming liability—when it comes to being ready for what's next.

## Remember Less to Do More

In *Why We Remember*, Charan Ranganath explains that "We forget because we need to prioritize what is important so we can rapidly deploy that information when we need it. Our memories are malleable and sometimes inaccurate because our brains were designed to navigate a world that is constantly changing… Human memory needed to be flexible and to adapt to context more than it needed to be static and photographically accurate."

Flexibility and adaptability are traits we look for in new hires and celebrate in seasoned colleagues. None of us know how things are going to unfold around us; the teammate who can adjust and change course to suit the circumstances will always be an MVP.

What Ranganath describes as a reason we forget—and remember—is a call to action for risk professionals. Our profession doesn't require a photographic memory; it requires navigation skills in a never static landscape. Something akin to a GPS that updates continually based on new road hazards and changing weather conditions. The team you'll be working with during your nonprofit's *next crisis* won't be the same team you served alongside the *last time* a major disruption to normal operations happened. The external partners and resources you can call on today are different from those of yesteryear. The tools and systems you rely on have changed as well.

## Remember to Learn, Not Ruminate

Ranganath writes that "Rumination—repeatedly circling back to negative events and spinning your wheels—is

the evil twin of nostalgia… To benefit from mental time travel, it's helpful to think about why the human brain evolved that capability in the first place: to learn from singular experiences. When we travel to past contexts, we can access experiences that reorient our view of the present. Recalling negative events can remind us of past lessons we have learned, so we can make better decisions in the present."

So how can an earnest nonprofit team "get ready" for what's next without resting on its laurels of surviving the last major disruption? And how can a team reflect on a past, negative event, without getting drawn into an unproductive blame game?

During a recent engagement helping a risk team develop a business continuity plan, I sensed a strong desire for a clear set of instructions to follow during a crisis. "We want to know exactly what we should do if X happens," a team member explained. I absolutely understand the yearning for a simple set of instructions in an emergency. That's why I appreciate and always read the safety card after settling into my exit row seat.

Risk professionals who want to foster and cultivate readiness for 'what's next' must be disciplined about sorting *what happened* from *what we learned*. Spinning our wheels over 'what went wrong' is demoralizing; capturing 'what we learned' is motivating.

## Try Our New Worksheet

The NRMC team has created a new *Lessons from Disruption Worksheet* teams can use to document and memorialize the compelling lessons from a crisis or other disruption. We encourage every nonprofit team to supplement contingency planning with a forward-looking, productive reflection on the past. We invite you to gather a remote or in-person team to work through three disruptions to identify the powerful lessons you learned and can apply to future, albeit dissimilar circumstances in a new context.

Our new Worksheet has three steps.

Step 1, Identify 3 events or circumstances that required the team to handle something unexpected, highly disruptive, or especially challenging.

Step 2, Brainstorm a few possible root causes (not people to blame!) for the disruptive event. For example, if the unexpected event was the non-renewal of a grant with a long-term funder, root causes might include: the funder's priorities shifted, the champion for the grant left the funder without a clear handoff, or the nonprofit no longer offers the types of services that were appealing to the funder.

Step 3, Brainstorm "what we learned from this experience." To avoid groupthink, ask each team member to identify lessons working alone. After each team member has identified at least 3 lessons, go around the room and ask each team member to share a single lesson. Keep going around until everyone's ideas have been expressed. Finally, brainstorm possible steps to build readiness for the next disruptive event. Using the example of a lost grant, a possible action step might be to identify a back-up to a key point of contact for every grant within the first few weeks of the new grant.

There is no tried and true formula that will help a team be prepared for anything and everything. But given the windy roads our missions are bound to travel and the potential lessons we can learn from every unexpected challenge, it's surely worth the time it will take to unpack lessons from three recent disruptions. We hope doing so will inspire your team to approach the road ahead with positivity and a renewed sense of readiness for what lies ahead.