

Nobody Likes to Be Told What to Do



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I've been re-reading *Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart: Thirty True Things You Need To Know Now*, a thin volume packed with powerful, heartwarming and heart-wrenching advice. During morning tea with my roommates (Mum and her dog Ringo), we sometimes read aloud short passages.

In Chapter 23, titled "*Nobody likes to be told what to do*," Gordon Livingston, M.D. writes, "The primary goal of parenting, beyond keeping our children safe and loved, is to convey to them a sense that it is possible to be happy in an uncertain world, to give them hope. We do this, of course, by example more than by anything we say to them. If we can demonstrate in our own lives qualities of commitment, determination, and optimism, then we have done our job and can use our books of child-rearing advice for doorstops or fireplace fuel."

This reference to parenting is both timeless *and* timely for risk leaders. So often risk leaders believe they must tell others what to do. Yet when I'm in conversation with leaders who reach out for risk coaching and support, I often find myself digging deep to inspire determination and spark hope. "You can do this!" I've said countless times.

How can you inspire risk awareness and safe conduct across your mission this year without doubling down on 'telling people what to do'? Here are a few thoughts.

Commitment

Being committed to something doesn't mean continuing tasks in robotic or mindless fashion. It means understanding the value of the activity and working to achieve its purpose. In a relationship (with human and pet companions and colleagues), commitment means the willingness to work through the rough spots. In a risk management function, commitment means recognizing that some activities may be unproductive. Or worse, counterproductive! Or as my wise, forever youthful colleague Erin Glockner used to say, "The juice isn't worth the squeeze."

Commitment in the risk function also means a willingness to experiment, and to reflect the practices you hope to inspire in others. Instead of advocating an 'open door' policy, check to see that your door—and your phone line—are open and you are happy to take calls and questions without an appointment. Training yourself to relish interruptions is one of the most important, essential skills of a risk leader. If you prefer to work alone, for long stretches and without surprises and disruptions, risk management was a poor career choice!

Determination

The essence of determination is refusing to give up. It doesn't mean refusing to acknowledge missteps, nor does it mean wandering aimlessly. Kurt Vonnegut wrote, "A step backward, after making a wrong turn, is a step in the right direction." If you're determined to see your risk function, program or practices advance the mission you believe in, remember to:

- *Identify what isn't working and find a new approach.* Chasing colleagues to fill endless fields in a meaningless risk register? Stop doing that. Simplify the format to a maximum of four columns and schedule time to elicit perspectives on risk instead of sending those desperate-sounding emails.
- *Invite contrary (not affirming) views.* During interactions with colleagues, ask, "What should we try or do differently to inspire risk awareness this year?"
- *Pause before dismissing any new idea.* In *The Art of the Idea*, John Hunt uses the term fragile to describe new ideas. He reminds us that it is easy, and sometimes instinctive, to snuff out ideas that feel contrary to our instincts. Don't do that! Listen, lean in, and ask questions. "How would that work?" "Tell me more."

Optimism

I'm an incurable optimist. Some mornings, however, I wake up and spend a minute wondering about that. "Why am I feeling so optimistic today? It makes no sense!" Gordon Livingston writes, "When people wish to defend their cynical outlooks, they seldom lack for evidence...Bad news is inherently more interesting than good and so we are daily inundated by stories of tragedy, chaos, and the depths of depravity to which human beings are capable of descending." He describes the ability to enjoy life as "the true wonder of the human condition... even as we are surrounded by evidence of its brevity and potential for disaster." Livingston continues by urging us to remain optimistic, adding that the ability "...to be happy with each other, constitutes the most useful example we can provide our children."

Although I recalled writing about *Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart* a few years ago, I could not remember which passages I was drawn to when I first read the book. A quick search helped me locate that article, written more than 15 years ago. To read my previous musings on the book, written while reflecting on a very challenging year for the nonprofit sector, see: [This Year: An Odyssey of Your Making](#).

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