



The Risk of Regret: Make Sure Your Mission Really Lives

**You can't change the world without taking some big risks.
A risk-management expert explains how to do so.**

By Melanie Lockwood Herman

You know how important it is to manage risk. But that doesn't mean trying to circumvent risk entirely. If you want your organization's mission to truly live, you can't guard it from all the risks in life. If you want your mission to change the world, you can't be too protective of it. You need to take some chances. You must learn to risk without regret.

Some Truths about Risk

Risk always refers to an uncertain outcome. If you've stripped away the potential to fail, you're not making a big bet; you're just coloring within the lines.

If you lose, all is not lost. We've all taken risks that didn't pay off. But all losses are laden with powerful lessons, far more potent than "I won't do that again!"

You won't ever know. It's impossible to truly see or think in 3-D, yet one of your responsibilities as a leader is to illuminate different perspectives on the future. Even with diverse points of view at the table, you can't contemplate

every possibility, every combination of outcome, or the precise lost opportunity from doing something or not doing anything. The residual unknowns remain, even after careful, inclusive consideration.

The status quo might not be the safest bet. Although you might feel that sameness is safer than bold change, this sentiment might not hold true for your nonprofit. As your organization continues to offer the same service mix to the same community of clients, others are likely pondering how to do what you do more effectively and efficiently.

Take Bold Risks Without Regret

Live by these tenets to take risks that you won't regret.

Haste not, regret not. When you make a decision – even an audacious one – with care and deliberation, you honor the mission of your nonprofit, the legacy of its founders, and the needs of the people and communities you serve. Deliberate planning (and contingency planning) can catch the what-ifs before they become costly missteps.

Think fast and slow, great and not so. Two helpful risk-themed planning questions are: What's the best that could happen? What's the worst? Follow-up questions include: What can we do to increase the odds of success? How can we reduce the chance of partial or full-on failure? Are we prepared to cope with and leverage whatever actually happens?

Look for learning before you leap. Many leaders find it hard to pause after not-so-great results, to excavate what remains for insight and learning. Perhaps a better approach is to identify learning opportunities *before* you make the leap. Pinpoint what you hope to learn, be flexible when new opportunities arise, and build upon the lessons, both planned and unplanned, that arise.

Fire up the team. According to survey results, only one in three employees feels engaged in the work they're doing or the organization they serve. This number should be absolutely unacceptable in a mission-driven nonprofit. Uninterested employees aren't inclined to take any sort of action – much less a risk – on their own. Inspire people to see what needs doing and move forward boldly to meet the challenges and solve the problems around them.

Cultivate the culture your mission needs today. No great organization has the same culture today that it had in a previous growth period. Your culture must adapt to the external environment and to internal shifts, and that means taking risks.

Tap the wisdom of (in)experience. Consider the benefit of junior mentors – less experienced colleagues, from within or outside your workplace, who can help you see your blind spots, identify alternatives, and strip the bias of experience from planning. Innovative perspectives don't always correlate with age, seniority, or years spent working in an industry.


Celebrate expertise, wherever it happens to be. The best way to tap wisdom is to recognize and rely on expertise wherever it exists within your nonprofit's team. Maybe your finance director knows how to motivate people to keep the office kitchen clean, and maybe your social media guru has nurtured more successful personal investments than your finance director.

Reward people for their mistakes. If people in your organization don't make mistakes, they haven't taken enough risks. Error and failure are inevitable if your organization is to grow and evolve. Look at mistakes as opportunities for strategic learning.

“Are you prepared to leverage whatever happens?”

“Only one in three employees feels engaged.”

Remember that risk rewards. Risk-taking isn't only important at the highest levels of decision-making. Nonprofit leaders who wish to live without regret will reward risk-takers in all levels of their organizations – from the CFO who produces a daring new financial dashboard, to the staff gardener who offers to cultivate a community garden as part of a workplace health initiative.

In *Everybody Dies But Not Everybody Lives*, Prince Ea poses this vital question: “I ask you, will your last words be “If only I had . . .”?” Those are words you want to avoid not only at the moment of death or retirement but every day. Look at the challenges facing you and make your decisions accordingly. You still have time to avoid future regrets and turn big dreams into reality. 

Melanie Lockwood Herman is executive director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center (nonprofitrisk.org). She welcomes your feedback on this article or your questions about taking risk without regrets at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.

The Many Rewards of Risk

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Manage for Today, Mentor for Tomorrow (Vol. 23, No. 5)

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Why Your Employees Are Losing Motivation – and What to Do about It (Vol. 29, No. 4)

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