

Risk Management ESSENTIALS

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THE RISK FUNDAMENTALS ISSUE



How to Build and Fortify a Critical Incident Process

By Rachel Sams

Want employees to buy into your nonprofit's critical incident reporting program? Use the words "critical incident reporting" sparingly, says Regina Wright, Senior Advisor for Child and Adult Safeguarding at Save the Children US.



Regina Wright

When Wright speaks with Save the Children employees, she explains in jargon-free language why incident reporting matters. She strips away language like "mitigation" and "compliance."

"As long as we're using [language] that way, we see this as a work-related compliance issue," Wright says. "We have kind of objectified the group we're protecting. They're a group we protect as part of a policy, versus these are people who are going to be impacted by our decisions."

Incident reporting processes ideally track incidents, accidents, and near-misses. Incident reporting data should also catalyze and inspire nonprofit leaders to improve operations, increase safety, and catch dangerous patterns before an accident or ethical breach occurs.

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How to Build and Fortify a Critical Incident Process

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Nonprofit teams that want to launch or evolve incident reporting must consider a variety of issues, from how to track incidents to how to foster a culture of trust. Not sure where to start on your journey? Here's a road map.

How To Begin an Incident Reporting Program

Solicit feedback on safety at your organization from staff and community.

If your nonprofit works with children, families need a say in how the organization handles issues around safety, Wright says. Without their voices, the process is incomplete. If your nonprofit provides transitional or permanent housing to individuals and families, you should invite residents to share their concerns about safety and incidents.

Nonprofits that want to build or evolve incident reporting should engage the people who deliver services for the organization, says Ann Terlizzi, Senior Director of Risk Management and Quality Improvement at Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota. Their feedback will ensure the system meets the needs of everyone involved and help change behaviors and operations for the better.



Ann Terlizzi

Create a way to report incidents.

Employees will need a system or method to alert management to an incident or near miss. Organizations can buy and customize off-the-shelf incident reporting software, or build their own systems using Excel or other readily available tools already in use. Start by creating a simple, straightforward form that employees fill out when an incident occurs. Consider the basic information you will need to capture. What happened? Where and when? How many people were injured or exposed to harm? What immediate actions did employees take? Did

law enforcement respond? Did media report on the incident? What long-term actions will the organization take to address the incident? Create a decision tree or guideline that routes incidents to parties that need to follow up, like human resources or a safety committee. Keep in mind form length and complexity can dissuade timely reporting. Include only the essentials in your basic incident report format.

Determine how your organization will evaluate an incident's impact.

Terlizzi created a system that measures "consequence value" of incidents at her agency. The system has five components: consequences to people's safety and emotional well-being, financial consequences, service consequences, property damage or liability consequences, and reputational consequences. Terlizzi gives each incident a score of 0-3 on each criterion. Incident reports can't be closed until specific issues are addressed, like what the organization did to respond to the issue and how much it cost.

Assign a point person to monitor reports and track progress on their resolution.

All organizations should have a single person with ultimate responsibility for incident reports, whether they invested in an online system or built their own. "When everyone's in charge, no one's in charge," says Terlizzi. Train a back-up person, so the system doesn't falter when the primary responsible staff person enjoys well-deserved time off.

Train your staff on the system. Craft a training program that explains what kinds of incidents should be reported and how to make a report. Terlizzi created an online training session employees review and quickly access when they need to report an incident. The training addresses the struggle employees often feel between the impulse to report an incident and fear of the consequences.

Wright leads small group reflection sessions after incident response trainings.

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“Allowing employees to informally share and discuss incidents during regular team meetings can be a low-pressure way to identify situations in which people might be afraid to report an incident.”

She gives real-life examples of incidents and asks the group to share how incidents might surface in their work. She walks people through the reporting system and explains what happens after a report is made.

Spell out that employees won't face retribution for reporting in good faith. While that statement is necessary, it might not end the fear, Wright says—and leaders have to make space for that. “You need to create an opportunity for people to say, ‘I'm nervous,’” she says. Leaders must validate employees' experiences in order to build an environment based on trust, transparency, and person-centered practices. This is

key to creating a culture in which people feel empowered to speak up through established reporting channels.

Allowing employees to informally share and discuss incidents during regular team meetings can be a low-pressure way to identify situations in which people might be afraid to report an incident.

Investigate and resolve to explore the root causes of every incident. A root cause analysis “can be very fruitful for people to get a different perspective or just talk it out in a very focused time,” Terlizzi says. “How did we get here? How do we make sure we're never here again?”

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“When employees identify themselves and report risks and near misses, not just violations, that could indicate they feel safe to report and empowered to protect.”

(See the sidebar with NRMC’s Root Cause Analysis Worksheet; a [fillable PDF version](#) is available [here](#).)

Create a system to look at trends over time and to inform your board.

You may want to build a dashboard or presentation to show your board what types of incidents occur most often and what types are increasing and decreasing. Sharing high-level incident reports with the board will be helpful if you need the board’s support and action on new policies or funding. Don’t collect data for its own

sake; use what you’re learning to help your nonprofit make changes to decrease the number and severity of future incidents.

The types of reports can tell you something about workplace culture, Wright says. Reports of violations that are mostly made anonymously could indicate a culture of fear. When employees identify themselves and report risks and near misses, not just violations, that could indicate they feel safe to report and empowered to protect.

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“Organizational changes, new management priorities, or changes in the environment could mean a program that seems to work well needs to evolve.”

How To Evolve And Improve Your Program

Once you have an incident reporting program in place, keep in mind that you will need to evaluate it thoughtfully over time. Organizational changes, new management priorities, or changes in the environment could mean a program that seems to work well needs to evolve.

Terlizzi’s impulse to evolve incident reporting at her agency came when she noticed “it was very murky what incidents needed to rise to the level of critical for our teams. I started to observe what types of incidents were coming in and talked with teams about what worked well, what didn’t and where they got stuck about making decisions on whether or not to report.”

Terlizzi says Lutheran Social Service’s incident tracking system helped the organization make a difficult decision about the organization’s ability to serve some potential clients. Lutheran Social Service supports people with intellectual disabilities in residential settings. Using the incident tracking system, officials noticed a trend of repeated critical incidents involving people with high needs—situations that involved calls to law enforcement, property damage, and hospitalizations. Leaders dug deeper and decided to ask more questions in their intake program to better evaluate whether they could provide the necessary supports for people with certain complex diagnoses.

Buy-in for incident reporting from the top matters, too. Terlizzi chose a revamp

How to Build and Fortify a Critical Incident Process
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of Lutheran Social Service’s incident reports system as her “breakthrough goal,” an exercise the members of the executive team at the agency do regularly. Appropriate breakthrough goals have the potential to catalyze positive change in the agency. To inspire the team to be bold, “breakthrough goals” aren’t directly tied to performance reviews. The executive team rallied around Terlizzi’s breakthrough goal on critical incidents. Now that the team can clearly see the consequences of incidents to the agency, executives can focus on incidents with higher consequences, instead of reviewing all incidents.

When organizations review an incident after the fact, “keep the focus on what the harm was or potential harm, as opposed to finger pointing at people. Keep it tied to your mission,” Wright says. Her reports center

the perspectives of people who experienced harm or could have been harmed, and their ideas about how to resolve the matter fairly and improve safety.

Any nonprofit that puts incident reporting in place must continually explore how the program can provide more information that helps minimize harm and improve operations. If you begin your incident reporting work by centering community and frontline staff, and revisit that imperative frequently, you’ll be well on your way.

Rachel Sams is a Consultant and Staff Writer at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Reach out to her with questions or ideas about critical incident reporting at rachel@nonprofitrisk.org or 505-456-4045.

Craft an Incident Reporting Form That Fits Your Organization

When you begin an incident reporting program, give your reporting form careful consideration. Keep in mind that your form may be the first thing employees, participants, attendees, volunteers, and others see when they decide to report a concerning situation or incident. Also remember that the goal of your incident reporting process is to elicit information on accidents and incidents as well as near-misses and dangerous or non-compliant circumstances that could lead to a future incident.

The purposes of incident reporting include addressing conditions that could lead to an accident or incident, helping an organization respond appropriately when incidents happen, and capturing valuable lessons and insights that will make your organization safer. To achieve those goals, your reporting form must be clear and easy to understand. It should gather all the basic information your organization needs to act.

Your form should ask the date, time, and location of the event, near-miss, or dangerous situation. It should ask who was involved and if there were any witnesses, if the report describes an accident or incident.

Basic Information			
Date of Incident:	9/9/2022	Time of Incident:	Click or tap here to enter text.
Organization:	Choose an item.	Line of Service:	Choose an item.
Unit Name:	Click or tap here to enter text.	Unit #:	Click or tap here to enter text.
Full Address of Incident:	Click or tap here to enter text.		
Name of Reporter:	Click or tap here to enter text.	Reporter Phone #:	Click or tap here to enter text.
Event Information			
<i>Employees involved in the Incident:</i>			
Full Name (Michael Jackson)	Role (DSP, Program Manager, Coordinator, Director, etc.)		
Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.		
Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.		
Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.		
Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.		
<i>Other individuals involved in the Incident:</i>			
First Name, Last Initial (Michael J.)	Role (person served, adoptive parent, worker, provider, vendor, volunteer)		
Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.		
Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.		
Click or tap here to enter text.	Click or tap here to enter text.		

The form should ask for a factual description of the incident. If possible, provide examples for guidance (“I witnessed a fellow employee violating the Youth Protection Policy by making a comment that seemed inappropriate to an underage attendee.”) Consider providing guidelines for what to include in the report, like avoiding jargon or acronyms, including a sequence of events with specific times, and focusing on facts and observations. Provide an opportunity for the person filling out the form to share their name and contact information if they wish to do so.

Consider including a separate section on the form where the

person responsible for handling incidents can provide more information later. This might include questions about how the organization will continue to care for people harmed by the incident and address unsafe conditions, whether any external parties will be contacted to investigate the incident, service changes as a result of the incident, and the costs of the incident.

Finally, ask several people with diverse perspectives on risk and incident reporting to review your form to make sure it will be easy to understand and complete, especially in stressful situations.

Root Cause Analysis: Use This Tool to Learn Why Incidents Happened

When incidents, accidents, and near misses happen at your nonprofit, pausing to consider why they happened is well worth the time it takes. A root cause analysis exercise can help you do that, so you can take steps to reduce the risk of future harm, loss or disruption.

NRMC's Root Cause Analysis Worksheet on the "5 Whys" offers a simple, straightforward approach. The worksheet, [available for download here](#), asks a team to describe an incident and pose the question: Why did this happen?

This question might yield an answer like "The little boy leaned out of his crib and fell and hit his head."

Whatever the answer is, ask "why did that happen?" In this case, the answer might be "The pre-school teacher turned her back on the class because she heard a commotion in the hallway, and no one was there to cover her."

Ask "why" a third time. Perhaps the answer is "An alarm malfunctioned in the hallway."

Ask "why" a fourth time. Maybe the answer is "Routine

maintenance has been delayed while we collect bids."

The fifth "why" might yield that "Budget pressures have led us to prioritize the purchase of new equipment over keeping existing systems and equipment up-to-date."

A Root Cause Analysis exercise provides an invaluable opportunity to get at the deeper

organizational issues that may contribute to an incident. As you can see, the process can yield information that may be painful for teams to face. Make sure to enlist a skilled and compassionate facilitator to take your staff through this exercise. Reach out to NRMC at info@nonprofitrisk.org with your questions or to explore additional guidance and resources.

Nonprofit Risk Management Center
Find the answer here | nonprofitrisk.org

5 WHYS

Root Cause Analysis

As you complete this exercise, recall the natural inquisitiveness of a kindergartener. When children seek to learn more about the world around them, they often plague adults with endless "why?" questions. Each answer is met with more curiosity to unpack the world's mysteries even further. Risk professionals can emulate this childlike learning technique by asking "why" five times. This process can peel away each distracting layer, revealing the root cause of a challenge or risk.

Describe a current challenge or risk (a disruptive event or action has materialized):
Example: a five member program team resigned without giving notice

Why is this happening/did that happen?
Example: the team decided to start a new, separate organization

Why is that?
Example: the team grew disenchanted with the support they were receiving

Why is that?
Example: the program the team supported was downgraded and is no longer a top priority for the current fiscal year

Why is that?
Example: the demands of a new funder led us to consolidate our priorities; something had to give

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Take Action on Risk: Make a Plan, Not a List

By Rachel Sams

“Research has shown that of all forms of human motivation the most effective one is progress. Why? Because a small, concrete win creates momentum and affirms our faith in our further success.” – Greg McKeown, *Essentialism*

Are you a compulsive or habitual list maker? If so, you’re not alone. Many risk management professionals love to make lists. Traditionally, lots of risk management efforts start and revolve around a list of risks.

We at NRMCM aren’t asking you to give up list-making, but we urge you not to make a list the centerpiece of your risk management efforts.

Our team has seen nonprofit risk programs with lists that totaled nearly 200 risks. Risk lists can quickly fill with clutter that distracts your team from the most important issues you face. We encourage you to try risk action planning instead. This

approach will help your organization make progress to fortify your mission and build resilience and readiness for risks that could have the biggest impact on your mission.

Your team can approach risk action planning in a variety of ways. We encourage you to pick an approach and jump in. You can always change course later, or start a different kind of plan when you finish one. Consider these options for how to make a risk action plan. Perhaps your team will form its own hybrid of these approaches.

Take a bite. Pick one risk that really worries your team (see the accompanying *Risk Management Essentials* article on uncertainty for ideas about how to choose a risk from among the big issues your organization faces.) Brainstorm how that risk could play out for your organization. Try our worksheets, “[Time For Action](#)” and “[Broaden Your Perspective](#),” to help you consider possible scenarios and actions.

Have a meal. Make a plan for how you will address several risks your organization faces, interrelated or not. Consider the relationships among the risks and how your team’s actions on one risk could affect others. Your process might show you that seemingly unrelated risks have relationships to each other. That work could help you surface mitigations to address multiple risks. Explore NRMCM’s “[Action Planning](#)” worksheet to ensure you’re thinking through the decisions you need to make and the perspectives you need to gather. Fight the temptation to get bogged down in the details of each risk. Focus on the commonalities: how would your organization adapt its operations to these types of disruptions? What opportunities and challenges would they create for your nonprofit’s ability to achieve its mission? What can we do today so we’ll be more prepared if any of these risks manifest?

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Take Action on Risk: Make a Plan, Not a List

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“Risk lists can quickly fill with clutter that distracts your team from the most important issues you face.”

Plan all the courses at the gala. You could think of your risk action plan as a menu of the major activities your risk team will undertake throughout the year. To do this, your team will need to brainstorm the biggest risks you face, prioritize the most important ones, and determine which you will take action on and how. The “Action Planning” worksheet could aid you here as well.

Whatever approach you choose, identify timeframes for action. Spell out when you expect to make decisions and have risk mitigations in place. Identify who you will gather input from before choosing your course of action, and who will execute the next steps in your plan. Estimate how much mitigations will cost and consider whether the cost of mitigations eclipses

the potential cost of the risk. Make sure you include diverse perspectives from across the organization. And don’t stop at the first ideas that come to mind when brainstorming how a risk might play out. Things rarely happen the way you expect them to.

Set aside time to test your action plans in a workshop, tabletop exercise, or drill. What potential issues surfaced that didn’t arise in your original brainstorming? Adjust your plan as needed.

If your organization approaches risk with practical action plans rather than exhaustive (and exhausting) lists, you’ll build your ability to respond to emerging risks. You’ll begin to understand your organization’s risk appetite—the amount of risk your team deems necessary to

achieve priority objectives and advance the mission. You’ll find yourselves drawing on lessons from previous experiences when a new risk appears, even if the two risks differ. You’ll grow together as a team.

Lists have their place: the grocery store, the day-to-day tasks of life. But when you stop believing that a list is the main ingredient in your risk recipe, the possibilities are endless.

Rachel Sams is a Consultant and Staff Writer at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She has experienced personal risk action planning in her relationship to social media. Reach out to her with questions or thoughts about how your organization approaches risk action planning at rachel@nonprofitrisk.org or 505-456-4045.



How to Handle the One Thing That's Certain: Uncertainty

By Rachel Sams

What are the big issues your nonprofit's leaders worry about when they can't sleep? Racial and social justice? [Climate change](#)? Inflation and economic uncertainty? All of the above?

Does your nonprofit invest time to talk about these issues and potential ways to address them? Or do leaders move from one pressing day-to-day matter to the next, with worries unacknowledged?

If you're not talking about the big head-scratchers, now's the time to change that. Yes, uncertainty is hard. But, as a risk professional, you know nothing is certain. If you and your team create a container for your worries, and put some structure around potential ways to deal with them, your organization can begin to tease out potential paths and make thorny issues feel a little less insurmountable. Here's how to begin.

How to Deal With Uncertainty

What are the big, scary issues you know your organization needs to deal with, but can't quite wrap your head around? Pick a couple that feel pressing. Set aside chunks of time at board or team meetings to discuss these issues. Use the time to sketch out a couple of potential scenarios on your topic, pause to reflect on the underlying conditions or circumstances, and brainstorm high-level ideas for how your organization could meet these threats or leverage the opportunities. This kind of scenario planning can help teams identify a path forward when threats feel chaotic or overwhelming and promising opportunities seem out of reach. Those skills pay dividends even if the specific risks you discussed don't arise.

Seek a variety of viewpoints. Welcome differences of opinion; they surface important information you need to know

about the team and the organization. Don't expect to make a decision the day of your first discussion. Set a timeframe for when you expect to act.

Some questions to ask: What do you know about the issue? What don't you know that you need to find out to make good decisions on how to proceed? How can you learn it? Assign follow-up tasks as needed. You may want to take this opportunity to make a risk action plan (see accompanying [Risk Management Essentials](#) article.)

Discuss these big issues at the start of your meetings. Leave minutes and routine business to meeting's end, so you talk about the big things when the majority of board or team members are present and fresh.

Bring It All Together

If your team fears uncertainty, work to shift how you talk about it as a leader, and how

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How to Handle the One Thing That's Certain: Uncertainty

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“If your team fears uncertainty, work to shift how you talk about it as a leader, and how you respond when uncertainty surfaces for your team.”

you respond when uncertainty surfaces for your team. With the complexity and rapid pace of change organizations face, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella has said his employees need to become “learn-it-alls,” rather than “know-it-alls.” Reassure your team that you don’t expect them to know everything, and that you can find your way to the answers together.

No risk management team can anticipate all the complex issues a nonprofit faces in tumultuous times. Your team can best meet this moment by learning how to research issues and identify what needs more investigation and discussion versus what solutions can be tried quickly. The authors of “6 Strategies for Leading Through Uncertainty” in the *Harvard Business Review* note that solutions to today’s complex challenges often require trial and error. Reward your team when they attempt something. If it succeeds,

celebrate it. If it fails, learn from it. Taking that first step, and continuing to move forward even in confusing circumstances, is more important than the immediate outcome.

Done well, this work will not only move your team from worry to action, but it should also yield strategic ideas for the future. The more your team learns to talk about and face uncertainty, the more adept you will become at risk management.

As the great physicist Marie Curie said, “Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood.”

Rachel Sams is a Consultant and Staff Writer at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She worries a lot, but finds that meditation, exercise and talking things out help. She’d love to hear how your organization deals with uncertainty. Reach her at 505-456-4045 or rachel@nonprofitrisk.org.



Emerging Risk Leaders Certificate Program

Cohort #2

Why Choose Emerging Risk Leaders?

This affordable certificate program is perfect for nonprofit team members getting started in risk management. Participants will learn from the expertise of Nonprofit Risk Management Center (NRMC) staff, leaders in developing risk management practices for the nonprofit sector.

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- 1.** You'll begin your journey by learning about the evolution of risk management in the nonprofit sector, explore 5 risk management myths and misconceptions, and 3 practical risk assessment techniques. The cohort will work in small groups to share ideas and ultimately you'll conclude the session by identifying your risk-themed project!

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- 2.** Session Two jumps right in to learning about common stumbling blocks, potential missteps, and ripe opportunities in risk management programs. You'll also receive an introduction to Business Continuity Planning and how to conduct an After Action Review. Leave this session with practical tools for your risk toolkit!

Session 3: April 25, 2023

- 3.** The final session will guide you in adopting a sustainable cadence for risk management activities at your nonprofit, creating simple but powerful Risk Action Plans, and techniques for forming and supporting a high-performing Risk Committee. At the end, you'll present an overview of your risk project to the cohort.

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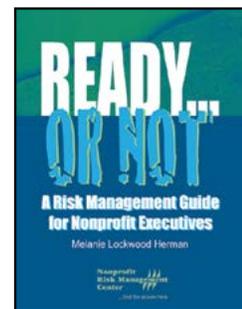
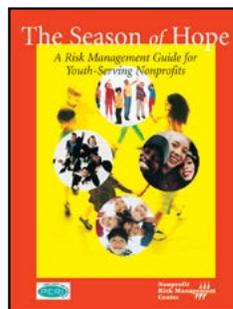
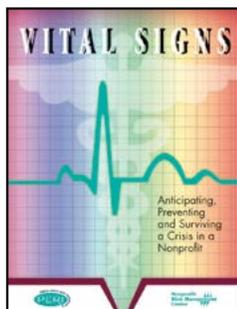
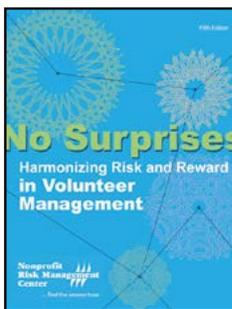
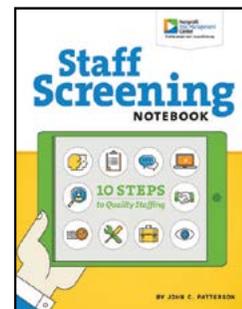
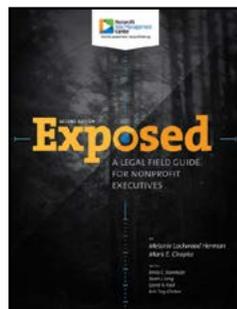
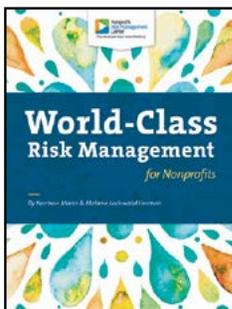
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Risk Management ESSENTIALS

Tips, Knowledge and Tools for Nonprofit Organizations

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The Salvation Army National Headquarters

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