

Kelman, I. 2004. "The Risk Not Taken". RiskPost: The Newsletter of the New Zealand Society for Risk Management, issue 3, no. 4 (March), pp. 8-9.

Full Text:

Despite, or because of, working in risk management, we are often unduly terrified of taking risks. I have had people tell me:

- "I'm not interested in vulnerability".
- "I don't like the word 'mitigation'".
- "You say that the material contradicts my view, but I cannot be bothered reading it, so I won't change".
- "Oh, I am a physical geographer, I don't know anything about human geography".
- Rather than compare our facts and work through the issues, "We'll just have to disagree on that".
- "I don't care how many examples you provide, I still won't believe you".

Plus similar remarks indicating that it is so much easier to avoid change and to evade trying something different. Instead, just continue with the standard, well-worn views and well-trodden approaches prevalent in risk management.

These have produced many successes. But they have also produced devastating failures.

Particularly in New Zealand, we are a relatively affluent society. We have the luxury of opportunities to explore new areas and to test new ideas. We have the resources and choices to pick innovative pathways which include missing elements.

Yet we rarely do. Instead, innovation is applying the same technique in a different case study or tweaking one aspect of a standard analysis or method. Starting from fundamentals again, revisiting the initial assumptions, or trying to define a new yet more sensible ethos is too radical, too difficult, and too politic. Or perhaps just too frightening.

For example, are human rights, injustice, and inequity a basic part of your risk management work? If not, why not? Do we believe in a sustainable, cohesive, secure, healthy society or are we simply interested in saving money and meeting the next deadline?

Increasingly, the international research and practitioner risk management community realises that environmental management, philosophy, community development, ethics, and sustainability must be embedded in all risk management, amongst other topics. We cannot stay within our own fields or training, but must forge ahead in learning about others' expertise while teaching others about ours. Interdisciplinary teams are not about specialists working together, but about specialists casting aside their specialist label to learn and do whatever is necessary to achieve the common goal.

Plenty of examples show the benefits, including significant economic benefits, which result. However far removed these topics and attitudes might appear to be from your work and working culture, they should be the basis for it.

If this scares you or does not interest you, I pose a challenge: take a risk. Think about these issues, read about them, talk to people about them, and write about them. If your organisation

or boss is not supportive, could they be convinced to take the risk of being supportive? If not, could you take a risk to directly, but sensibly, challenge and change that ethos?

Assuming that nothing can be done avoids the risk. The risk not taken contains all the challenges, ironies, and hypocrisies of Robert Frost's road.

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