

The Kid President Approach to Risk Management

Natalie Shaak | @NatalieShaak | Drexel University

In my time in the fraternity/sorority profession, nothing seemed to receive more hours and attention than the topic of risk management. As professionals, we throw the phrase around as a tool, a scare tactic, a checkbox on an annual report, and an educational concept we wish our students would embrace. Our students unfortunately see it as a roadblock to fun or an endless set of forms. Even some of our colleagues see it as just another hoop that must be jumped through. While the general concept of risk management can be useful, in reality, for many of us it has become more of a buzzword or a complicated series of policies than a guiding principle. Kid President might be able to help us change that.

Whether in reference to alcohol, drugs, sexual assault, hazing, fire safety, or another topic, we are told to manage our risk as chapters, campuses, and national organizations. But what does that really mean? Let's be honest, none of us wants anything bad to happen to our students or members, but the majority of what falls into "risk management" today is policy and legal blankets to protect organizations from being sued. Of course, this is important. As organizations and businesses, we could not continue to function without funds and with ongoing legal issues. However, the complicated policies with lists of allowable and prohibited activities could be doing more harm than good when it comes to practically applying risk management.

With all the policy and legalese, how do we help students understand what they should and should not be doing to keep each other safe and protect the organization? How many of us have spent hours discussing and debating with students about these policies? In how many hazing workshops are presenters asked, "is X or Y hazing?" where students want a black or white answer?

There has to be a better way to deal with potentially dangerous situations that could harm individuals and organizations and educate students about their decisions. It has to be about more than just not getting in trouble.

One day, skimming through a newly purchased book – *Kid President's Guide to Being Awesome* (2015) – I saw an image that made me sit up and say, "If only my students/chapters/colleagues looked at risk this way."



It said, "If it doesn't make the world better – Don't do it." (p. 52)

This is quite the statement; one very much rooted in a discussion of morality and moral development.

I sat there a minute, looked back at the image, and asked myself, "If all fraternity/sorority

members and advisors subscribed to this concept, how would the community be different? How would risk issues look different?" I believe we would be a community more congruent with our values. We would have better reputations in our community. Our members would be safer.

But then the naysayers would challenge: "it's not possible to get our students to follow this. They don't have the moral capacity to understand and implement a concept like this. If we didn't have policies, it would be a free for all." Of course, the concept is quite lofty and completely eliminating policy is not realistic, but how could we use this concept as a guiding principle in how we approach our work? What could we implement that could move our students close to this ideal approach to risk management?

The key is to focus more on the moral development of students and not just teaching them policies, as supported by Gentry McCreary (2012) in his article "A Case for Moral Development," because students are more open to this kind of education, and it is found to be effective. Other research has also shown a correlation between moral judgment and campus conduct code violations; therefore it could be concluded that focusing on moral development would lower violations of policies addressed through risk reduction and management education (Cooper and Schwartz, 2007).

So, if we are inspired by Kid President to take a moral approach to risk management, reduction and education, what do we actually do if we aren't just teaching policy? It is important to note that moral development does occur naturally throughout the college experience. However, research has identified a number of effective moral development activities or approaches that could be used to increase moral judgment and character in college students in a more extensive way (Gardiner, 2000; King and Mayhew, 2002; McCreary, 2012; Parker and Pascarella, 2013). Some include:

- Social justice education, specifically on a long-term basis (such as a full academic term course) as opposed to a one-time activity
- Service learning with intentional reflection
- Values-focused education, specifically identifying incongruence between personal and organizational values with behavior
- Activities and campaigns that challenge long-held social norms
- Engagement with faculty outside the classroom, specifically in the discussion of topics based on moral dilemmas or values-based content
- Opportunities for engagement with other students outside the fraternity/sorority community
- Role playing challenges and debates, where students are required to argue viewpoints that oppose their own
- Critical reflection opportunities as part of policy violation sanctions

As professionals, we can benefit our students and members by engaging in similar activities among our peers to develop our own moral judgment and reasoning. We should also continue

to educate ourselves on moral development and stay abreast of the research available on the topic.

McCreary ends his 2012 article with a challenge to our profession, which I will echo, “What if, as a field, we spent as much time, energy, and effort on moral development as we currently spend on leadership development? In our battle to align behavior with values, moral development may be the best weapon we have at our disposal” (p. 24). I believe this holds true in the amount of time spent on risk management education as well. Let’s embrace Kid President’s approach to life as our approach to risk management and focus not on just following rules and policies, but on making the world more awesome.

References

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