
When the Unthinkable Happens:
Fostering Post-Traumatic Growth through Lament, Learning, and Love
Oregon Episcopal School

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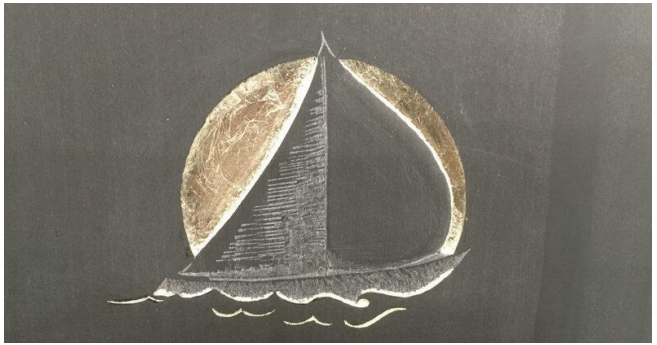
I have studied many times
The marble which was chiseled for me--
A boat with a furled sail at rest in a harbor.
In truth it pictures not my destination
But my life.

For love was offered me and I shrank from its disillusionment;
Sorrow knocked at my door, but I was afraid;
Ambition called to me, but I dreaded the chances.
Yet all the while I hungered for meaning in my life.

And now I know that we must lift the sail
And catch the winds of destiny
Wherever they drive the boat.

To put meaning in one's life may end in madness,
But life without meaning is the torture
Of restlessness and vague desire--
It is a boat longing for the sea and yet afraid

~ Edgar Lee Masters, "George Gray" from The Spoon River Anthology



"It is a boat longing for the sea and yet afraid"

— Edgar Lee Masters

Oregon Episcopal School and the 1986 Mt. Hood Climb





The Rev. Michael Spencer, OES Head of School

Timeline of Institutional Remembrance | 1986 ~ Today

Key milestones in program evolution, risk philosophy, and institutional observance

1976 – 1986

Origins & Tragedy

1976–1986
Basecamp Program Mt. Hood Climbs

1986
Mt. Hood Climb Tragedy

1986
Reports issued by School and AAC

1986 – 1987

Pause & Pivot

1986–1987
One Year Pause on Program; Bill Proudman begins as ExEd Director

1987
Shift to Backcountry Experiences

1987 – Present

Ongoing Program

1987–Present
Ongoing Development of ExEd program using a scaffolded approach

1987–Present
Continuous Remembrance & Observance

2018 – 2026

Modern Era

2018
Partnership with Experiential Consulting & Risk Philosophy developed

2020–2026
Griffith Report: findings and recommendation implementations

2026
40th Commemoration and Observance

Lament ⟷ Learning ⟷ Love

Institutional Reflection

Griffith Report Recommendations

1. Work with licensed climbing guides
2. Pursue other ExEd opportunities
3. Audit programs for safety
4. Require use of satellite phones
5. Implement consensus (or horizontal) decision making
6. Implement reporting system
7. Investigate accidents with independent investigators
8. Plaque on Mount Hood to memorialize the Climb
9. Offer elective course/speaker series on mountaineering
10. Share institutional learnings





Post Traumatic Growth & the Healing Journey











Telling Our Story



External Narratives

There will always be other narrators on this topic.

- Hundreds of articles in the press
- **2018** — *Outside Magazine*, Mount Hood's Deadliest Disaster (Author Pauls Toutonghi)
- **2019** — Code 1244: The 1986 Mount Hood Tragedy (Author Ric Conrad)
- Multiple podcasts and blogs
- **Upcoming** — HBO Documentary and book by Outside Magazine freelance writer in the works

Our Institutional Response

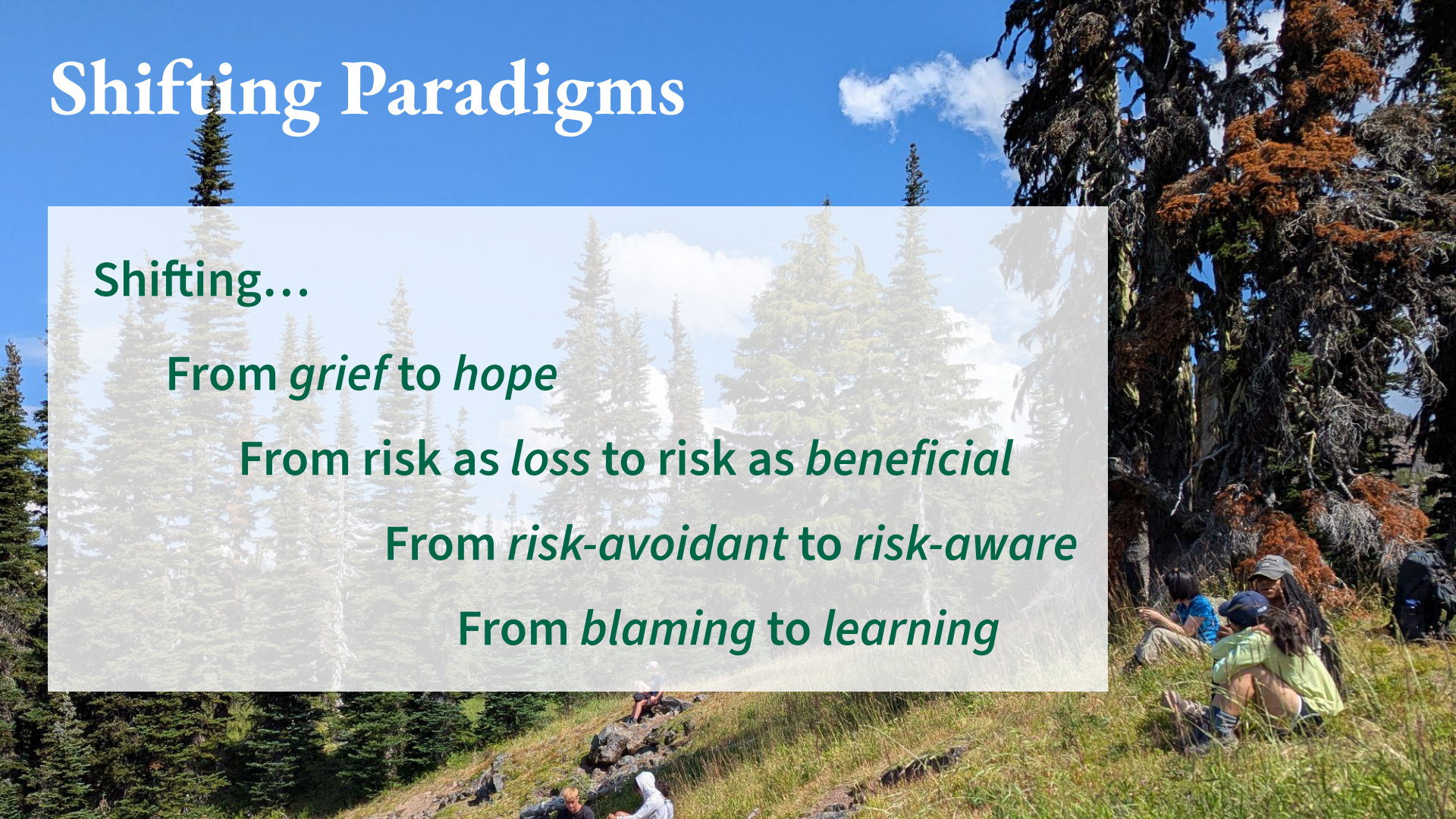
Actions Taken in 40th Year

- Hired historian to review stored archives to create comprehensive, cited research notes for current and future school employees.
- Renovated Mount Hood Memorial Garden
- Presented requiem mass for Portland community with 600 in attendance.
- Interviewed climb survivors and family members for our own publication.
- Added public information about the climb to website for transparent communication.



Steve Smith, Founder of Experiential Consulting, LLC

Shifting Paradigms



Shifting…

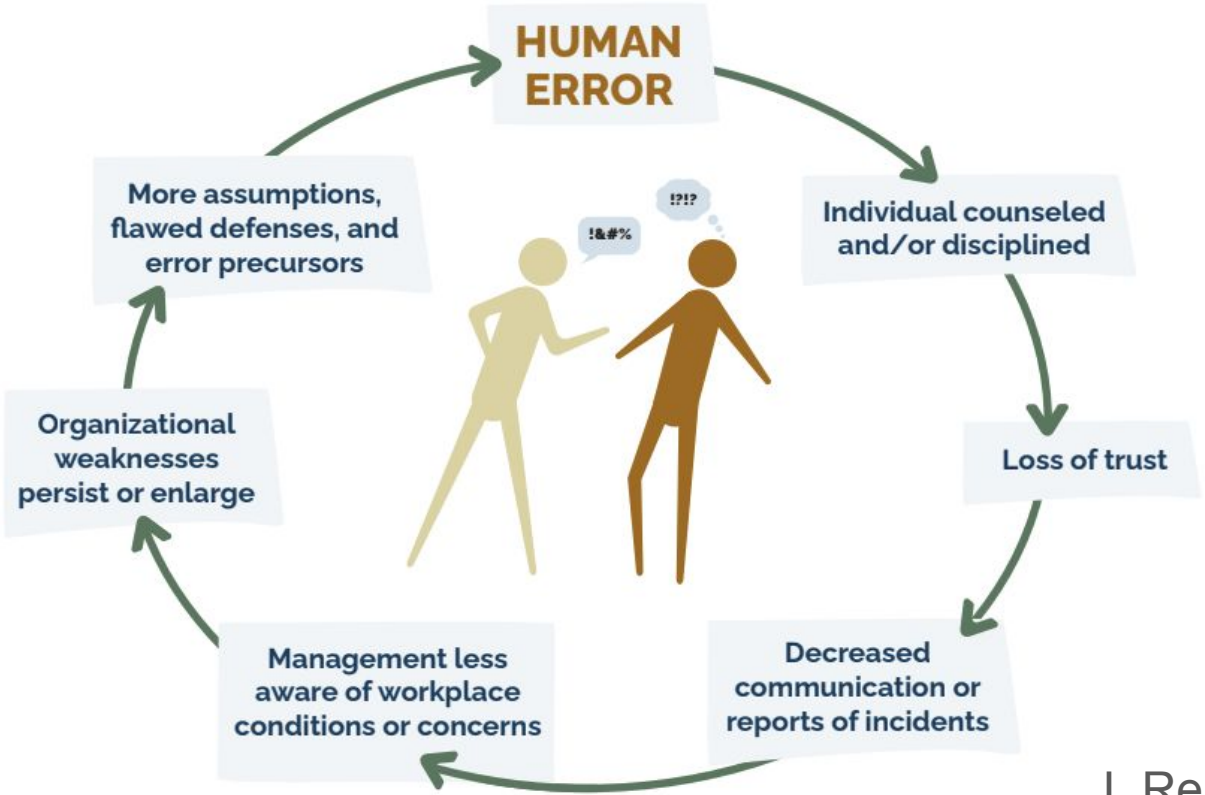
From *grief* to *hope*

From risk as *loss* to risk as *beneficial*

From *risk-avoidant* to *risk-aware*

From *blaming* to *learning*

Blame Cycle



J. Reason, 2001

Trust Loop



C Lloyd, 2020

What are signs like this trying to achieve?



How might these signs send a different message?



What Changed?



- **Risk Philosophy**: Avoiding the “zero paradox”
- **Near-Miss Learning:** Normalizing staff learning from events and near-misses, not chasing after “zero incidents”
- **Risk Literacy**: Changing how we talk internally and externally about risk - and designing programs to increase risk management skills for students
- **Encouragement** to share the lessons learned publicly, which is happening here today!



The Responsibility of Adventure

Paul Taylor, Director of Experiential Education at Oregon Episcopal School

A Developmental Pathway: Discovery to Independence

Pre-K–Grade 1 → Discover and Explore

Grade 2-5 → Build Foundational Skills

Grade 6-8 → Practice Judgment and Teamwork

Grade 9-12 → Deepen Skills, Agency, and Responsibility









Risk Philosophy

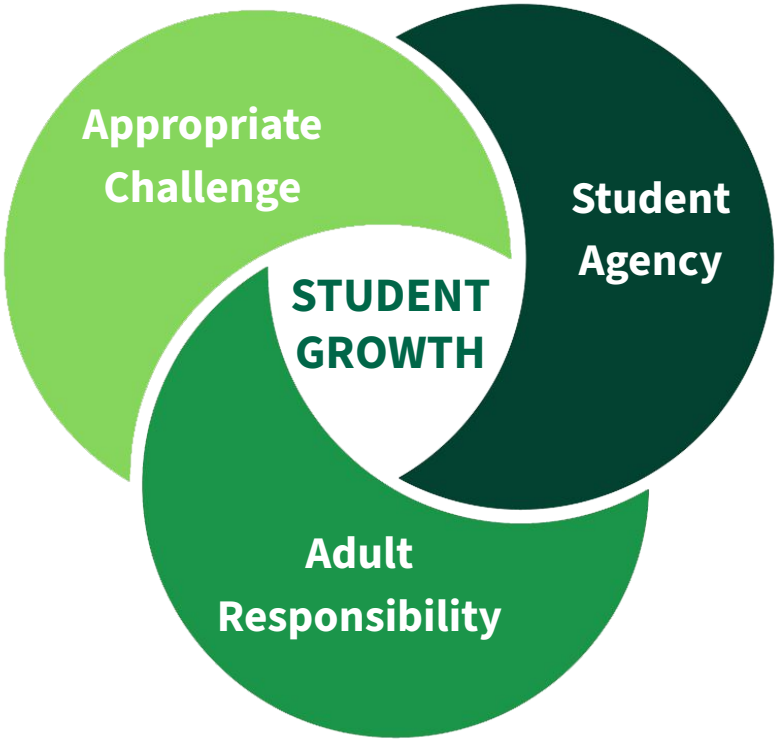
- We bring students into situations of challenge, unfamiliarity, and risk because we believe these experiences foster intellectual, physical, social, emotional, artistic, and spiritual growth
- Risk cannot be eliminated from experiential education or in life in general
- Identify risk, educate those involved, and mitigate hazards when possible
- Managing risk is an *ongoing process* of judgment, preparation, and adaptation





Challenge by Choice

- Students have different ability levels, life experiences, social/emotional needs, and varying comfort levels
- Encourage students to stretch into discomfort, but not to ignore their limits
- Create space and a culture to speak up, ask for support, and communicate discomfort
- Give students agency in their own experience



Risk Design for OES Trips

Before

Prepare and Anticipate

Assessing the hazards of wildfires and AQI for fall programs

Planning for dynamic conditions and responses

During

Monitoring and Adapting

Monitoring changing conditions - making timely decisions

Communicate clearly to teams in field, admin, and parents

After

Reflect and Improve

Evaluate the experience, document incidents/near misses

Review decision making - incorporate into future planning





The Standard We Hold Ourselves To

- We believe in creating meaningful and challenging experiences as learning opportunities
- We prepare for foreseeable hazards and respond to changing conditions
- We listen to and value our students perspectives, ideas, and limits
- We review our practices, design for transparency, and remain open to improvement



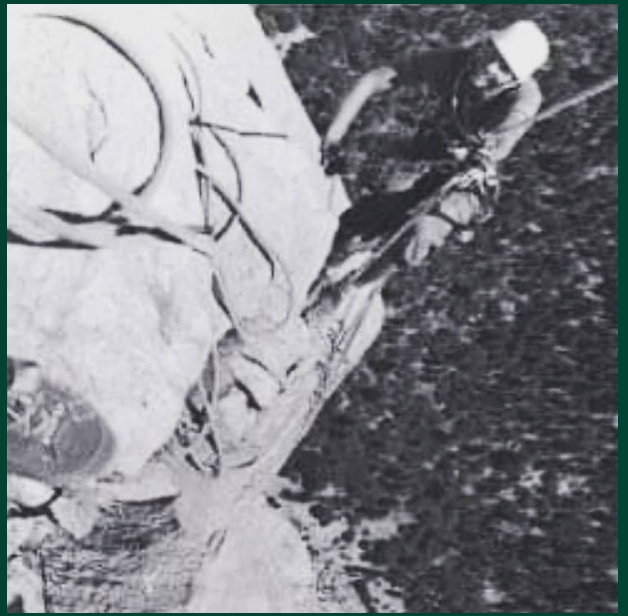
The Why of Risk

Lorca Smetana, Resilience Strategist, 1986 Mt Hood Climb Survivor

Belonging



Lorca before the 1986 climb



Joe Fitschen, El Capitan, 1960

The Questions



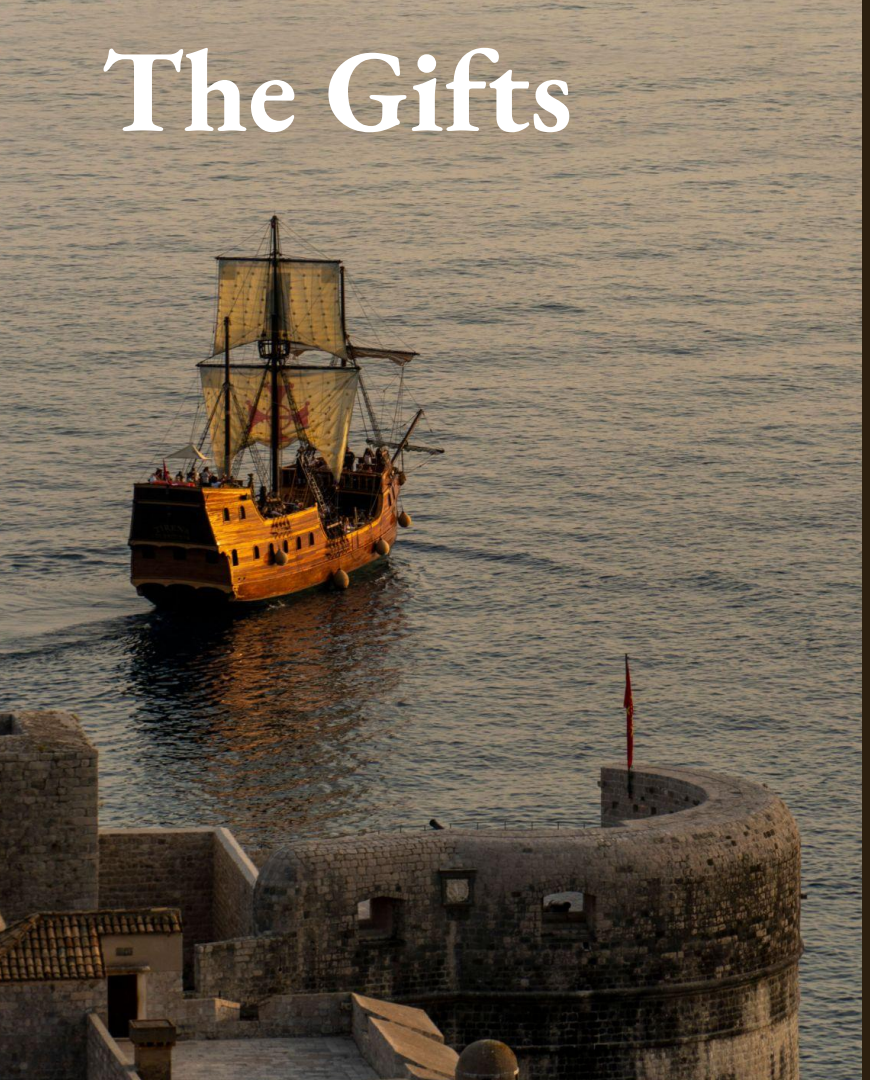
Risk Design



The Ridgeline



The Gifts

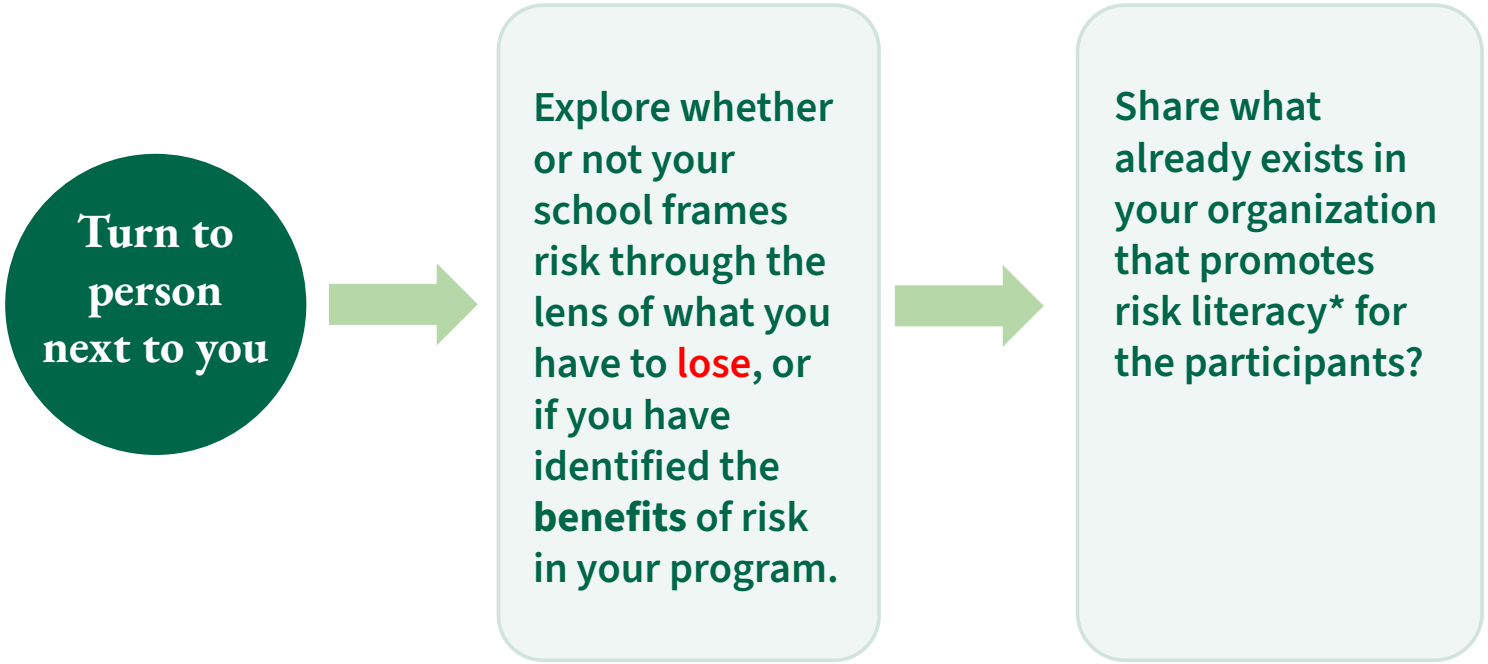


"A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for."

~ John A. Shedd


Steve Smith WRMC 2026 Photo

Discussion Prompt



***Risk Literacy:** The practical ability to evaluate and understand risk in one's life

Three Action Steps

1. If your organization has a risk philosophy statement, review it to determine if you have elements of a zero paradox that you may want to consider changing.

2. If you don’t have a risk philosophy statement, consider developing one.

3. Look for elements in your program that either perpetuate, or arise from, a Blame Cycle.

Today's Presenters

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  Founder, Experiential Consulting
- **Paul Taylor**, taylorp@oes.edu
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  Resilience Strategist, Survivor of 1986 Mount Hood Climb

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