Nonprofit Risk Management Center

Learning Bites, Courtesy of Shark Week

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A member of my immediate family—who would prefer not to be named (or shamed) in this article—is so fearful of sharks that they find it impossible to consume any of the fascinating programs featured during "Shark Week" on the Discovery Network. I'm the opposite. A global pandemic interrupted my 2020 plans to see the largest shark predators up close at a location offering cage-diving with great whites—it sounded fun to me!

While watching multiple NatGeo programs on the curious characteristics of sharks, it occurred to me that shark behaviors offer thought-provoking insights for risk leaders. Parallels between the fascinating behaviors of sharks and risk lessons for leaders include:

Things out of place warrant a closer look.

When a shark detects something unusual in their regular habitat, they move in to inspect the anomaly. From time to time, this risk-aware behavior may lead to shark encounters with surfers. A paddling surfer looks slightly like a seal from below but different enough to warrant a closer inspection. In their book *Managing the Unexpected*, Karl E. Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe write, "Seek to understand your context better. Things that are out of place in a context bear closer inspection." While attending a workshop on "situational awareness," the speaker urged attendees to pay attention to their surroundings. This is wonderful advice for risk leaders at work and elsewhere. Awareness of anomalies is critical to taking the next step.

Rely on what you have, but always have a backup.

Many years ago, I was vacationing with a young person—before the onset of their shark-phobia. As we strolled the beach in Venice, FL, we encountered a kind retiree who handed us a small bottle filled with shark teeth. "Would you like these?" she asked. We gratefully accepted the gift. One of my bite-sized learning moments from this year's Shark Week was that sharks have row upon row of teeth. Their teeth are incredibly sharp, partly because they don't use them for very long before they fall out and are quickly replaced by the backups growing beneath. According to the Natural History Museum in the UK, "Sharks continually produce teeth throughout their entire lives. Depending on what they eat, sharks lose a set of teeth every one to two weeks, getting through up to 40,000 teeth in their lifetime. This means that shark teeth are continuously raining down onto the ocean floor…" These dental redundancies have contributed to sharks occupying the apex predator position in the ocean for nearly 300,000 years. Imagine your risk management program's effectiveness if you always planned for backups!

Just because you haven't seen it doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

A few years ago, I watched *The Meg*, a film about the mythic megalodon shark. Until recently, I thought the species depicted in the movie was a frightening figment of a filmmaker's imagination. I was wrong; 7-inch-long fossilized teeth from *Otodus megalodon*–found on every continent except Antarctica—offer compelling evidence of megalodon's existence and its fierce bite and enormous size. When executing your organization's annual risk assessment, don't automatically discount those outlandish possibilities! Consider how those disruptions or opportunities might affect your mission and develop a monitoring plan and key metrics. That way, you won't be entirely taken by surprise.

Build resilience by adapting.

Sharks' storied history offers a lesson in resilience and adaptation. According to the experts at www.earth.org, sharks have existed for 380 million years and survived 4 of 5 mass extinction events. One of these events wiped out "96% of marine species, 70% of terrestrial vertebrates and 57% of all known insect families." A handful of ancient shark lineages survived by moving into deeper waters. Modern sharks and other large marine animals—seals, whales, and sea lions—often experience traumatic contact with boats. Many sharks survive these violent encounters. Survival is attributed to a shark's ability to heal external wounds rapidly, with most of the healing occurring in the earliest stages of the healing process. And while risk leaders may not have an evolutionary edge to heal their organizations when disruptions occur, they can quickly assess the efficacy of risk action plans, make adjustments, and adapt to be more ready to face what comes next.

Like risk, sharks get a bum rap.

Did you know you're more likely to be killed from a dog bite than a shark bite? Sharks kill 4 Americans on average per year, and according to the Florida Museum International Shark Attack File, only 9 unprovoked bites resulted in fatalities in 2021 worldwide. In contrast, Greenpeace reports that humans kill an estimated 100 million sharks each year. Do you imagine losses, lawyers, and litigation when you hear the word risk? If yes, you're not alone. Work to broaden your understanding and appreciation of risk. When you take a risk, there is a possibility of gain, loss, or some of both.

Think about the world your organization and mission live in. It's filled with wonder and opportunity, just like the ocean. And just like the ocean where sharks live and swim beneath all the waves, there are risks at every turn and decision your organization will face. Don't miss the opportunity to dive into the depths, see amazing things, and take your mission to places you never imagined because risk looms like a toothy Great White shark! Instead, take time to understand your risks (and sharks) – your newfound understanding will help your organization become stronger and more resilient like our 380 million-year-old aquatic friends.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions, comments, and stories about close encounters with sharks or the misunderstood 'bad rap' that risk often gets at nonprofits. Reach out to share your stories or questions to Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.