

Risk Leadership with Situational Awareness



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My dog Braxton recently reminded me of an important life skill: situational awareness. Braxton is a medium sized, predominantly Labrador mix with a fervor for playing frisbee. When I open the door, she waits for my signal to go out. Before leaving the porch, she pauses with her entire body poised, alert but not tense. She sniffs the air and does a broad 180° visual scan before we proceed. As she performed yesterday's scan, her body stiffened slightly, and she raised a paw. Then, she leaned forward pointing to the adjacent woods. Sure enough, I could discern the outline of a doe and two fawns well camouflaged by surrounding foliage about 600 yards away.

Every time we go out our front door, Braxton is attuned to ensuring that everything around us is okay. And, as nonprofit leaders, isn't that exactly what we want to do? On a daily basis, don't we want to assess our surroundings to understand where opportunities and threats might lie?

Situational awareness can help you scan information about your environment and the people in it, allowing you to anticipate what might happen next. Developing and practicing situational awareness allows you to react and respond effectively to potential risks, opportunities, or changes. There are three primary components:

1. **Perception:** being mindful of your surroundings and observing what's happening, including people, objects, and conditions,
2. **Comprehension:** understanding the information you've gathered and what it implies, such as recognizing potential risks or opportunities, and
3. **Projection:** informing decision-making to allow quick and safe responses.

Situational awareness can improve decision-making, communication, and empathy. It can also be a crucial tool in assessing personal safety—something more nonprofits are reaching out for help with as their teams face or anticipate threats. Unlike Braxton, humans are not necessarily born with extensive situational awareness, but we can cultivate it. Here are some activities that can help you develop some situational awareness muscles:

- **Practice focusing on the moment.** When you choose to be fully present, it frees up space to fully observe and process the information around you. When you set aside your devices, it helps minimize the external stimuli that can divert your attention. Let yourself be more attentive to sights, sounds, smells, and sensations. Train yourself to notice small details.
- **Analyze and interpret information.** Identify patterns and connections that either make sense or seem out of alignment. Take time to consider different perspectives on the situation at hand.

- **Predict outcomes and develop contingency plans.** Think about differing outcome scenarios and how you and your team might respond. Anticipating outcomes and planning ahead can help you react quickly and effectively in unforeseen circumstances.
- **Regularly engage in mindfulness.** Mindfulness exercises, such as meditation or deep breathing, can help you develop a greater sense of presence and awareness. Set aside time each day to engage in these exercises and cultivate a mindful mindset.
- **Practice active listening skills.** Active listening involves fully focusing on and engaging with the speaker. Practice active listening by giving your full attention, maintaining eye contact, and asking clarifying questions. This can help you gather information and understand the context more deeply.
- **Seek feedback from others.** Ask for feedback from trusted people who can provide insights into your situational awareness skills. They can offer suggestions for improvement and help you identify areas of growth.
- **Reflect on past experiences.** Take the time to reflect on past experiences and analyze how your situational awareness skills factored in. Identify areas for improvement and consider how you can apply what you have learned to future situations.

Developing situational awareness as part of our leadership toolkit can be challenging. We live in a world that is literally blurred by the speed of change. We are constantly bombarded by information and distractions from multiple sources simultaneously. Yet when we take time to deal with distractions and manage information overload, we open ourselves to seize upside opportunities and manage downside ones. We can learn to still our busy minds, use critical thinking, and explore alternative perspectives. Like Braxton, we can be poised-alert but not tense. We can assess the circumstances of the situations before us and determine a next move that will best serve us and our teams.

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