To Be a Better Risk Leader, Fly Like a Hawk



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On one of the warmer days last week (a balmy 45 degrees), I hiked the woods on my best friend's property. I was joined by my trusty four-legged companion Braxton, but we both were a little surprised by our other companions. Five hawks, masters of the air, were making lazy circles in the sky. As always, I was awed by their capacity to efficiently use air currents to soar with minimal energy expenditure. By circling within a thermal to gain altitude and then gliding toward the next one, hawks can cover vast distances with scarcely a wing flap. They leverage instinct, learned behavior, and specialized sensory input to soar efficiently on air drafts and thermals. Not surprisingly, it occurred to me that as nonprofit risk professionals, we can become more effective and "soar gracefully" in our roles by adopting strategies that mirror how hawks fly.

Like a hawk using **instinct** to find rising air currents, we can rely on our knowledge of nonprofit operations and common issues that our organizations face. Instinct suggests we can find "lift" in trusting both internal risk champions and external colleagues to provide timely insights on understanding our risk exposures and level of readiness to address them. Leaning into that network can free up time and mental space and avoid the burnout of constant, unfocused vigilance.

Soaring hawks also rely on **learned behavior**, adapting flight patterns based on their experience with landscapes and weather conditions. Similarly, effective risk management requires us to adapt and iterate processes. We can gather institutional knowledge and learn from after action reviews, near misses, or prior failures within our organizations and from across the sector. This learned behavior can help us implement clear and concise internal processes to identify risks, analyze them, and take action. In addition to real-time operational insights, the learnings can inform future strategies, improving work quality and conserving cognitive energy.

Finally, the hawk's **specialized sensory input** allows it to perceive subtle changes in air pressure and temperature, invisible to the naked eye. We must develop a "feel" for the organizational culture and external landscape in which we work. This includes listening to staff concerns, scanning the regulatory horizon, and using appropriate tools to visualize and track interconnected risks. Developing this keen awareness allows us to anticipate emerging risks—the subtle "thermals" of potential opportunity or danger—and work with our teams to adjust course, building our resilience and capacity. Like those five hawks I observed last week, this approach can allow us to maximize our effectiveness as risk management professionals, conserving energy, rather than "flapping our wings" in reactive chaos.

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