

What's Good for the Goose Is Good for Risk Management



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Last weekend, I was outside for a round of freezbee with my dog, Braxton. (Freezbee is our wintry version of catch-and-return frisbee that we play together, come sleet or snow or below zero temperatures.) On Sunday afternoon, we were interrupted by a riotous fanfare of honking overhead, heralding the approach of several V-shaped, southern-bound goose formations.

It seemed a little late in the season for geese to make the trek, but the internet told me that sometimes geese delay migration until the last minute to stay in familiar, food-rich areas longer. When you think about it, that makes perfect sense because their annual migration is loaded with so many seemingly insurmountable obstacles. On that journey, geese will travel hundreds of miles. They will have to find safe areas to rest and recharge. They will need to forage for food, water, and shelter. And they will do all of this while avoiding predators such as eagles, foxes, bears, wolves, raccoons, and, of course, us.

This begs the question: how do geese manage to deal with all of this? I learned that geese use teamwork, employing behaviors that allow them to better navigate their changing environment. As you might guess, at NRMC, we think these techniques can provide a few cues for nonprofit risk champions.

Shared Leadership and Distributed Responsibility. Geese rotate the leader when the point goose gets tired, preventing burnout and distributing the hardest work. Nonprofits can distribute leadership roles, not just tasks, empowering staff and board members, reducing the risk of reliance on one person and building capacity for future challenges that may arise.

Collective Efficiency. Geese use the V-formation to create uplift and reduce drag. Operational teams in a nonprofit can collaborate with each other, sharing tools and insights that can save time, energy, and money, as well as helping to avoid familiar, preventable risks that can develop from working in silos.

Communication and Early Warning Systems. Geese honk from behind to encourage leaders and to remind everyone to maintain speed. In a nonprofit, transparent, clear, jargon-free communication is essential to raise awareness and support understanding of critical risks on the horizon. Effective risk management requires timely identification of risks and practical action before concerning possibilities become crisis events.

Support Systems and Resilience. When a goose is in trouble, two geese drop back to help a sick or injured

member, protecting them and rejoining the formation later. A nonprofit can create a community of colleagues, board members, and volunteers who can step in during challenging periods to ensure continuity and resilience.

Shared Vision & Strategic Alignment. Geese are purposeful. They migrate in a common direction with a shared goal. A clearly articulated vision can help a nonprofit inspire its constituents to work together to advance the core mission and strategic priorities. When teams work together, in sync, they fortify the mission and also build resilience against mission threats.

It seems like geese are on to something. They fly in aerodynamic V-formations. They take turns leading and supporting each other. They create an adaptable unit that builds strength through their interdependence. It is easy to see how, as a risk champion in a mission-focused nonprofit, you can use those “goose guidelines” to help your team build a stronger, more adaptable organization, less prone to single points of failure and better equipped to navigate the complex skies of the nonprofit world.

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