

THE RISK APPROACH OF ADMIRAL EDWARD HAWKE



ABOUT THE RISK APPROACH SERIES

This study is part of THE RISK APPROACH series which examine the risk attitude of naval leaders. The objective of this series is to uncover elements that shaped these leaders’ risk approach, understand their philosophy towards risk and draw lessons for today’s leaders in any sectors of activity.

ADMIRAL EDWARD HAWKE 1705-1781

A British naval officer, Admiral Hawke excelled as a fleet commander in forward combat roles. His aggressive approach combined with close combat tactics made him a powerful opponent at sea.

He was also known for his seamanship and organisation skills that allowed his ships to stay at sea for long periods of time. Under his command, the Royal Navy was able for the first time to maintain a constant blockade of the French coasts.

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*I can boldly affirm that all that could
possibly be done has been done.*

(24 November 1759)

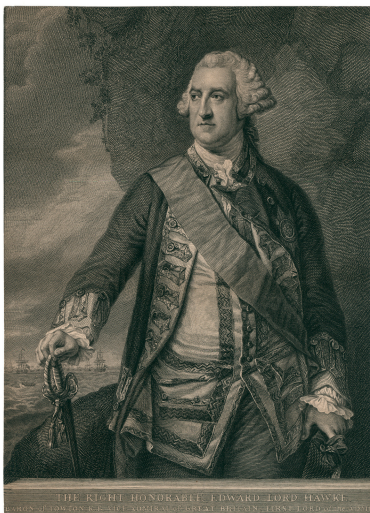
Admiral Edward Hawke

A NAVAL CAREER MASTERING RISKS

Hawke took high risks during naval battles as a ship captain and later as a fleet commander. The pinnacle of his career came in November 1759 when he commanded the British fleet at the battle of Quiberon Bay, during the Seven Years’ War.

At Quiberon Bay, Hawke did not hesitate to put his fleet at risk to follow the French ships in dangerous waters to force combat. Despite the lack of pilots, heavy winds and low visibility, Hawke pressed on seeking for battle.

In spite of all these unfavourable factors, Hawke won a decisive battle from which the French Navy did not recover during the war, preventing a potential invasion of the British Isles.



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THE ULTIMATE RISK TAKER

Hawke was a purposeful risk taker. He understood that taking risks can in certain circumstances prevent even greater risks. He did not hesitate engaging in battle in unfavourable conditions when implications were high, but he also knew when to refrain when risks exceeded potential benefits. In any case, to keep the ascendancy over rivals, initiatives have to be taken to generate momentum.

- 1 TAKING RISKS WHEN REQUIRED
- 2 CALIBRATING RISKS AND REWARDS
- 3 KEEPING THE INITIATIVE

THE RISK APPROACH OF ADMIRAL EDWARD HAWKE



1

TAKING RISKS WHEN REQUIRED

“

As to the loss we have sustained, let it be placed to the account of the necessity I was under of running all risks to break this strong force of the enemy.

(24 November 1759)

A leader has to be ready to take high risks when high stakes are at play. An integral part of risk taking is the appreciation of a situation and the readiness to tolerate losses. In some cases, not taking a risk could be the greatest risk.

2

CALIBRATING RISKS AND REWARDS

“

I cannot think of running the risk of disabling three ships of the line for an object so inconsiderable as a privateer and four or five empty transports.

(23 July 1759)

As much as taking risks can be a necessity, the level of risks taken has to be aligned with the expected level of rewards. Assessing the relationship between risks and returns is crucial to evaluate how much risk to accept.

3

KEEPING THE INITIATIVE

“

I do my duty to my King and country in stopping so great a number of armed ships sallying out at once against the British trade till I receive positive directions for my conduct in this affair.

(21 December 1760)

Taking risks requires constantly assessing and deciding the best course of action. In the absence of instructions, a leader has to take the initiative to take the appropriate level of risk.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

André Fournier is a risk management practitioner and naval historian with more than 25 years of professional experience. He is a risk researcher and the founder of MARITIME STRATEGY RESEARCH.