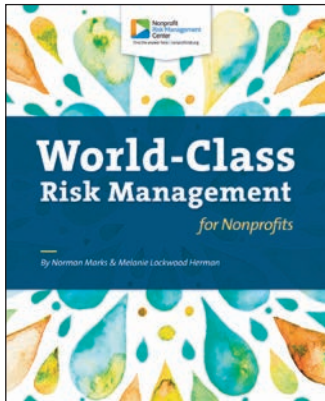


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THE CRISIS MANAGEMENT ISSUE



The Future is Now: Preparing for the Unknown Crisis

Preparing for a possible future crisis can feel overwhelming and abstract for many nonprofit leaders. With competing priorities and meeting the needs of stakeholders on a day-to-day basis, taking the time to think through how your nonprofit will respond to a currently non-existent crisis can end up taking a back seat. However, when a crisis hits your organization, your level of preparation can make the difference between bouncing back stronger than ever and quickly being overwhelmed by the sudden rush of urgent demands. Although many leaders and nonprofit board members would rather not consider the myriad ways that a crisis could

unfold, the right time to plan for how your organization will manage a crisis is **now**—hopefully long before you experience one.

Creating a practical and actionable crisis management plan should be a goal for every nonprofit, and even small organizations can take steps to prepare for a future crisis. Whatever the size or resources of your nonprofit, taking the time to think through some of the goals and constraints of your organization can make the crisis planning process more effective and efficient, and a lot less intimidating. The following essential preparations can serve as a step-by-step approach for preparing to manage a crisis situation.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

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The Future is Now: Preparing for the Unknown Crisis CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

1. Build an active and engaged crisis management response team. To get the crisis management preparation process off the ground, the first step is to identify a team of motivated and enthusiastic individuals who will be ready to lead the response to a crisis situation.

There are many ways to empower a crisis management response team, and some organizations take the approach of adding crisis management planning responsibilities to the plates of the leadership team. Although it is essential to involve the leadership team, creating a more diverse team with representatives from various areas of the organization might be the best approach for many nonprofits. On-the-ground operational teams are often the first affected if a crisis occurs, and they likely have important insights for the crisis planning process. An existing multidisciplinary task force or committee might be in position to undertake crisis planning work as well.

When establishing your crisis management team, remember to:

- Include key individuals with viewpoints or expertise in areas essential to a comprehensive and integrative crisis response effort, like finance, cyber security, legal, facilities, public relations, and other functional representatives, if you have them.
- Discuss decision-making authority and determine which team members will make the final judgment call on specific issues, needs, or questions that might arise and warrant urgent response during a crisis.
- Consider whether a separate but cooperative crisis communication team is a good option for your nonprofit. Determine which team members might serve as your official spokespeople during a crisis, and educate staff across your nonprofit about who has authority to respond to

media inquiries and other concerned stakeholders during a crisis.

- Whatever approach your nonprofit determines is best for building your team (or teams), holding consistent meetings with predetermined agendas and allowing time for follow-up on action items are essential steps for making progress in crisis management preparation.
- 2. Determine your nonprofit's readiness for a response.** Assessing the crisis management capabilities that your organization already has in place is a great early step in identifying gaps. Evaluating readiness might be an appropriate agenda item for your new crisis management team's first meeting. Reflect on crisis readiness prompts such as:
 - What crisis management planning or related work has been done in the past? Have our planning efforts helped us or hindered us when we faced crisis events in the past?
 - Is there already a crisis management plan in place? Is it relevant, actionable, up-to-date, and communicated widely to staff? Even if there isn't a plan specific to crisis management, does our nonprofit have other plans, policies or procedures in place for dealing with organizational disruption?
 - Have we collaborated with the appropriate external partners (e.g., local police, fire and rescue, neighboring nonprofits, etc.) to prepare for a crisis? What skills, expertise, or resources might we need to access during or after a crisis, and who can we work with to meet those needs?
 - How might our various stakeholder groups—including internal stakeholders—need information and support from our organization during and after a crisis? Have we considered various stances or positions we might take in response to certain

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

The Future is Now: Preparing for the Unknown Crisis

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2



crisis events? Have we prepared communication templates, a website splash page, or other resources we could edit and publish efficiently when a crisis hits? What lessons have we learned in the past about maintaining our reputation in dire circumstances?

- How is our board expected to provide oversight and support during a crisis? Are they fully empowered to fulfill their crisis roles?
- Have we effectively planned for the loss or adaptation of our facilities, space, equipment, systems, data, and any other resources that we rely on to conduct our day-to-day work?
- Do we understand and agree upon possible approaches to crisis recovery, for example, projected timelines and processes for reinstating specific programs, services, operational functions, systems, etc. that might be disrupted or put on hold?

You may end up finding lots of gaps in your nonprofit's readiness, and that is nothing to be worried about. Identifying existing gaps when you are just starting the planning process is much better than recognizing them in the middle of a crisis,

when your time and resources are already stretched thin.

3. **Define crisis.** Another of the top priorities for your team will be to take time to think through some of the situations that you might consider to be a crisis for your nonprofit. One of the early realizations for many teams when they begin to think through what a crisis might look like at their organization is that crises can take many different forms.

If you are having trouble starting the brainstorming process and figuring out what types of crisis your nonprofit might face in the future, check out ready.gov for examples of a variety of potential emergency situations. This government-run website also includes many resources for dealing with and preparing for some of the common concerns associated with the occurrences of common crises.

Some potential crisis situations facing your nonprofit will be obvious and might be "worst case" concerns of your stakeholders, such as: an active shooter situation or a natural disaster that results in flooding or fire at one of

your facilities. Other situations might be more unique to your particular circumstances. For example, if your nonprofit is very small and has one primary individual responsible for managing financial assets, dealing with an allegation of embezzlement might be a crisis that threatens your nonprofit's ability to function. Many nonprofits also find that they are not prepared to deal effectively with legal claims from disgruntled former employees. Furthermore, they might not realize that fighting claims that turn out to be entirely frivolous may still be costly and time-consuming for the organization.

Deciding how your nonprofit decides to define a crisis and identifying situations or scenarios that would prevent you from mission-focused work is an important step in determining your response and best preparations.

Remember that even with all your brainstorming and preparing for possible crises, the next crisis that hits your nonprofit might not be one that you even thought possible. Even so, taking time to think through different scenarios will prepare you for adopting a crisis response mindset and will give you the ability to respond more effectively when a crisis of any sort arises. It will also provide experience identifying major gaps in your nonprofit's preparation, such as a lack of responsive policies or inadequate insurance coverages.

4. **Match crisis events to appropriate responses.** Using the list of potential crisis events that would cause disruption to the mission-advancing activities of your nonprofit, determine what types of responses would be appropriate. For example, in an active shooter situation, determine how your organization would conduct a facility lock-down at each location where your nonprofit has programming. How would

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

The Future is Now: Preparing for the Unknown Crisis
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3



fire and police be notified, and what types of safety measures are in place for individuals located at the facility? How would communication continue, and which key individuals would need notification?

Creating flexible responses that can be used in different situations will help ensure effective management when a crisis arises that does not fit exactly into a pre-envisioned scenario. When you are determining the potential responses, also consider how to select a response when the time comes. It is essential to make sure that there is a simple and effective way to choose the appropriate response when a crisis is underway and chaos is reigning.

Equally important, a signal indicating the activation of your crisis management plan is needed. Communicating that a crisis and response are underway helps ensure everyone is on the same page as far as what is being done, and how it is happening. Another signal indicating that the crisis is over is also important. Employees and other stakeholders don't need to maintain emergency mode any

longer than necessary, nor do you want to waste resources when there will undoubtedly be additional work to do in the aftermath of a crisis event.

5. List it out. Much of crisis planning revolves around the logistics. Actively maintain essential records to ensure that critical information and processes are documented, and that everyone and everything is accounted for in a crisis. Some of the essential lists and backups to create and keep up-to-date might include:

- **Key public safety agencies** in the area, including primary contacts and their information. Reaching out to public safety agencies can provide insights into how those agencies would respond in an emergent situation, such as an evacuation of a facility.
- **A comprehensive list of staff, volunteers and program participants.** If something happens and you need to reach out to stakeholders quickly, you will need to have an accurate list on hand. This list should be updated any time there are any staffing changes with your nonprofit, and it may be

best maintained by your Human Resources group since they typically have the most accurate data. Many organizations provide employees with electronic access to their own contact information records so that they are able to update address or phone numbers as needed. It is also important to maintain an accurate list of all participants in each of your nonprofit's programming activities in case a crisis arises during an event.

- **Inventories of your organization's physical assets and facilities.** Keeping a list of the physical assets that your nonprofit owns—particularly those that are critical for day-to-day operations—will help things run more smoothly when you are trying to bring operations back on board. For nonprofits that have extensive operations and multiple facilities, inventories with location-specific information will also be useful.
 - **Electronic backups of all essential organizational documents** including stakeholder information, insurance policies, facility deeds, car titles, and financial records. If your organization doesn't already have a policy for backing up important files and documents, now is a great time to make sure you have a policy in place and a process for testing that your backup procedures are working as expected.
- 6. Communication is key.** There are two distinct lines of communication that are very important for any crisis management response: internal stakeholder communication and external communication with the public. Many organizations prepare for external communication but fail to prepare for the essential internal communication aspects of a crisis.
- **Communication within your nonprofit.** Internal communication has two primary functions during a crisis. First, internal communication about what

The Future is Now: Preparing for the Unknown Crisis

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

is occurring ensures that employees, volunteers, board members, and other internal stakeholders are on the same page about what is happening and how the organization's response is playing out. Being proactive and keeping everyone informed about the progress of a crisis situation can help allay fears about the unknown and help employees and volunteers feel engaged as valued and essential members of the nonprofit.

Second, informing internal stakeholders how your nonprofit will manage crisis communications with external stakeholders can prevent a crisis from evolving into something much more complex. Reduce the risk that internal stakeholders will make communication mistakes such as responding to media inquiries without authority or training, inciting drama or outrage on social media, or going "off message" in any medium or communication channel.

- **Communication with the general public.** External communication is often the first type of communication that comes to mind when thinking about how your nonprofit will respond to a crisis. Preparing to speak to the media can be daunting, and facing the potential reputational blow that can result from a public relations disaster can be one of the greatest fears for nonprofit leaders. The selection and training of skilled spokespeople—as well as the thoughtful preparation of talking points, press releases, and other messages—can reduce the risk of responding inadequately or inappropriately when a crisis strikes.

An increasingly important form of communication in today's world is social media. Many organizations, especially those that frequently release time-sensitive information to the public, choose to use social media outlets to get the news across as quickly as possible.



Although social media can be a huge benefit when used properly, thinking through how and when it will be used is also a great responsibility. If your organization doesn't already have a policy for official social media use, consider creating one and communicating it to your internal stakeholders. Include information about who will be responsible for crafting messages, monitoring responses and questions, and responding to inquiries. Appropriate and effective use of social media can help engender trust and confidence, bolstering your nonprofit's reputation during an otherwise challenging time.

7. **Put the pieces together and have a plan for your plan.** Once your team has taken the time to think through the essential components of crisis management, consolidate the information you've gathered into an accessible and actionable crisis management plan. Focus on delivering a user-friendly plan that will spur effective decision-making during a crisis event.

Plans are most valuable when put to the test. On a regular basis, practice crisis response efforts such as facility lockdowns, chain of command, communication scenarios, and emergency notification tests as you would conduct any other simulated emergency drill.

Also devise a review plan to ensure that the information contained in your crisis management plan remains accurate and relevant. Needing a crisis management plan and coming to find that it is years out of date and doesn't contain accurate contact information or facility plans could be a catalyst for calamity in a crisis situation. Remember that revision of your crisis plan doesn't necessarily have to occur all at once. For example, the staff and volunteer lists can be updated as staffing changes, and facility inventories might be done on a biannual basis, alongside structural appraisals or other regular walk-throughs.

Whatever you decide works best for your nonprofit, make sure that your plan isn't just sitting on a shelf gathering dust. Otherwise, by the time you need it, you'll be scrambling to figure out which pieces

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

The Future is Now: Preparing for the Unknown Crisis

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

are still accurate, and where you'll have to start from scratch.

8. Learn from the past. For many, cleaning up after a crisis event cannot end fast enough. Due to the stress of the situation, nonprofit leaders can often hardly wait to finalize the steps to recovery and put the crisis behind them. But before you close the door on the crisis and finish brushing all the remaining bits under the rug, it's important to take a step back and learn from what just occurred. Some of the key questions to ask during an after-action review might include:

- What exactly happened during the crisis? What elements had we prepared for?
- Did our crisis management plan work as we expected it to? Does any part of it need to be updated or revised based on our experience?
- What aspects of our response went well, and why?
- What aspects of our response were not as smooth as they could have been, and how can we improve them for the future?
- What did our internal and external stakeholders think of our response efforts?
- Were there any secondary surprises or challenges that arose during our response or in the wake of the crisis?
- What can we do to prevent similar situations in the future?

When considering these questions and working to prepare more effectively for the next crisis situation, it is important to encourage an open and honest discussion and to get feedback from individuals throughout the organization.

While preparing for an unknown future crisis can feel overwhelming when you're starting from scratch or you've just inherited an aging or outdated crisis management program, proactive preparation and a measured, intentional approach can make what at-first seems like an entirely abstract activity more concrete and feasible. ■



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Right Back At It: Fostering Organizational Resilience

Resilience is often defined as the ability to recover after a setback or in the face of adversity, or having the capacity to adapt to new challenges. For many nonprofits, resilience is essential for every day mission-advancing work and is not only relevant in the face of an existential crisis.

Working to build resiliency at your organization will prepare your team for a crisis event, and also enable your team to take on higher-risk, higher-reward ventures, which less resilient teams could not withstand.

Risk Management and Resiliency

Inevitably, at some point in your organization's life cycle, a crisis situation will arise that will challenge your

“The difference between a strong man and a weak one is that the former does not give up after a defeat.” — Woodrow Wilson

organization in difficult ways and may even threaten the organization's future. For resilient organizations, embracing the challenges arising from these situations and learning lessons from dealing with difficulties plays a role in ensuring future success. Nonprofits that are just beginning a risk management journey may not have had the time to focus on developing resilience. Furthermore, because the initial investments into cultivating a resilient culture do not yet exist, there may be a

lack of risk awareness on the part of organization leaders and key constituents.

By understanding how resilience is a necessary partner to crisis management preparation and by engaging leaders in risk management conversation, your team can begin the process of building resiliency.

The Many Faces of Resiliency

Resiliency can take many forms for a nonprofit. In some cases, an organization may have resiliency built into its mission,

Right Back At It: Fostering Organizational Resilience
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7



and leaders may bring personal qualities that enhance the resiliency of the organization. Most of the time, however, nonprofit leadership devotes ample thought and effort into fostering resilience in all corners of the organization.

Some resilience enhancements will focus on management philosophy, integrated throughout the nonprofit, while others might be more specific to one operational area. A few facets of resilience are detailed below.

Redundancy

One key component of resilience is redundancy, or having more than one contingency plan in place to remedy a crisis or to achieve success. Though the term *redundancy* often evokes negative sentiments, in risk management practice, redundancy is essential. In the case of crisis management and preparedness,

resilience is fortified by increasing redundancy in risk practices.

Increasing redundancy at your nonprofit might be as simple as implementing an organization-wide emergency notification system or training a second or third person as back-up for important operations such as accessing your nonprofit's vendor records and contact information. It might also invite complexity, such as having a secondary system in place for notifying staff and participants that a facility is in lock-down if your primary contact system is not working.

Talent Development and Leadership

Another way that nonprofit teams intentionally enhance resiliency is by emphasizing talent development, or hiring a workforce that has resilient characteristics and helps nurture a resilient culture for the organization. Resilient characteristics include humility, patience, the ability to focus on the present, and a drive to support and build up coworkers and others.

Nonprofits that focus on talent development may find that the culture of an organization is already formed around a unity of purpose. A key trait among many nonprofit leaders who encourage resilience is a positive focus on the empowerment and support of peers and direct reports. A rare but effective resiliency trait is the desire to make oneself—as a team leader or team member—obsolete to the point that other team members have been empowered to take on your role if a crisis or personnel transition demands it. The journey towards organizational resilience can conflict with individual egos and often requires selfless service by nonprofit team members.

While seeking to hire individuals that display resilient traits is important,

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Right Back At It: Fostering Organizational Resilience

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

developing these characteristics amongst existing staff and volunteers is also vital, along with emphasizing cross-training and creating succession plans to manage transitions when organization leaders depart for any reason.

Business Continuity

Business continuity planning (BCP) is sometimes implemented in concert with crisis planning, though BCP is typically broader in nature and prepares a team to respond to a variety of challenging events. For example, a nonprofit team might need to implement a business continuity plan when the office sprinkler system malfunctions and floods the facility, damaging equipment and files. Though the event might not be deemed a “crisis,” it warrants enacting contingency plans, perhaps for telework or off-site work, as well as to repair to organization’s space, equipment, and data.

Tips for Enhancing Resiliency

- **Consider drivers of resilience that are unique to your nonprofit.** Many of the things that can be done to strengthen resiliency within your nonprofit are common in organizations of all kinds; however, some resiliency enhancements will be very specific to your nonprofit’s mission, the context in which you operate, the audiences you serve, how your programs are run and managed, and so forth. When planning to bolster resilience, assessing your organization’s special traits could help you identify and bolster vulnerabilities, while also helping you build upon existing strengths. For example, building resiliency at a large nonprofit with diverse facilities and programs might require leaders from different those silos to come together to figure out what facility-specific and program-



specific crisis planning must be done, as well as where efforts and lessons can be shared or replicated. A team that uses a generic crisis management plan or a singular approach to crisis response across a diverse array of programs and offices could be positioning itself for disaster, when response doesn’t account for nuanced needs.

- **Foster a culture of candor, trust and mutual support.** Culture is often considered to come from the top of an organization, stemming from the attitudes and actions of the board, the Executive Director/CEO and the senior management team. In reality, culture is affected by all team members in an organization, and can shift gradually as team members come and go. Essential to building a resilient culture—one that can bounce back in the wake of a crisis or other challenging event—is fostering a sense of mutual support and trust throughout your

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

Right Back At It: Fostering Organizational Resilience
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9



organization. Build up each member of your team. Encourage individuals to speak up when they need help, when they have ideas, and when they have concerns about risks, organizational dysfunction, misconduct, or any other challenges your team might face. A culture that stimulates candor, trust, mutually supportive relationships, and open communication will serve as a springboard in a time of crisis.

- **Assume responsibility for enhancing your approach to stewardship.** After a crisis event occurs, whether in the life of an individual or a nonprofit organization, most of us want to retreat to a defensive posture in hopes of limiting reputational damage and minimizing the perception of involvement. This approach often has

the opposite effect on a nonprofit's reputation—causing the public to question the management and future of the organization. Although it is often difficult in the moment, assuming responsibility for your team's lack of preparedness for or involvement in a crisis—whether a breach of the personally identifiable information (PII) of volunteers or donors, or an allegation of sexual abuse by a former employee—can engender trust in your organization over the long-term. Stakeholders and the general public expect nonprofit leaders to apologize, listen, implement improvements, and do better next time. Consider what stance or values your organization might want to project when implicated in a crisis, scandal, or other high profile

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Right Back At It: Fostering Organizational Resilience

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

event. Embrace the opportunity to present a cohesive front to the public, and to share your commitments to learning and your specific plans for improvements on the path forward.

■ **Commit to cultivating real change.**

Devise and stick to an actionable timeline and approach for post-crisis reflection, review, and adaptation. Meaningful learning from past crisis events might include engaging in dialogue with peer organizations, conducting after action reviews with internal teams, and honestly reflecting on the many failures, errors, or oversights that might have caused or exacerbated a crisis. While your team focuses on dealing with the here-and-now of the crisis and getting back on track with your mission-fulfilling work, you must also consider what *will* or *should* change as a result of a crisis event. If the crisis was an act of child abuse after an unauthorized person gained access to a facility where services are provided for children, how will you ensure that this cannot happen in the future, and what will you do if it does? How will you implement effective and reasonable safeguards that address the concerns of your stakeholders—all while balancing the need to continue taking some risks in order to serve youth and advance your mission? Dedicate ample time to having the difficult conversations about what went wrong and why in order to learn from the past and plan more effectively for the future.

■ **Embrace opportunities to evolve and innovate.** Often, a crisis event will arise in an area within your nonprofit that is not as robust as it could be. In this type of situation, a crisis may be the catalyst you need to change and

evolve your organization in a new direction. Once a crisis event is over and you are working to learn from what happened, taking the time to get input from individuals with diverse roles across the organization might shed light on areas that can evolve or be improved for the future.

Some ideas or insights from individuals with diverse viewpoints might seem drastic. However, obtaining input from other peer organizations or taking the time to understand the reasoning behind a suggestion might offer a viewpoint you hadn't previously considered. Crisis recovery can also be a good time to renew partnerships with key constituents, including other organizations and volunteer teams. Don't neglect your relationships at a time when they might be crucial for your future.

Finally, a major event might trigger the need to review your organization's strategic plan. Reevaluate the relevance of your organizational goals and strategies to ensure that your nonprofit's direction remains aligned with your mission and the needs of your stakeholders.

Keeping It Together

In the end, a crisis event is unlikely to change the primary purpose or mission of your organization, but don't ignore the possibility that experiencing a crisis will (or should) change how your organization operates on a day-to-day basis. Consider how enhanced systems and processes—and most importantly, new commitments to collective learning and improvement—can enhance your success and your recovery from future crisis events. Take the time to proactively build resiliency into your organizational culture and planning processes, and reap the benefits in the future, when you need them most. ■



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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

The Future is Now: Preparing for the Unknown Crisis.....1

Right Back At It: Fostering Organizational Resilience7

The Risk Management Marketplace12

Products/Publications from the Nonprofit Risk Management Center.....15

NEW AFFILIATE MEMBERS

Learn more about NRMC's Affiliate Member program at nonprofitrisk.org/affiliate-membership

- Camp Fire
- Central Park Conservatory, Inc.
- Collens Wager Insurance
- Colorado Nonprofit Development Center
- MiracleFeet
- Robin's Nest Inc
- Vital Strategies