

To Infinity and Beyond: Unleashing Imagination to Build Your Organization's Resilience



By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

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"An infinite-minded leader does not simply want to build a company that can weather change but one that can be transformed by it. They want to build a company that embraces surprises and adapts with them." - Simon Sinek

As we continue to cope with disruptive consequences caused by COVID-19, many nonprofit sector leaders crave the comfort of stability. Everyone is daydreaming of a time when everything can return to "normal." As appealing as the concept of stability might outwardly seem, there is another concept that will produce a more enduring organization poised to achieve its mission. Simon Sinek thoughtfully explores and contrasts the concepts of stability and resilience in his most recent book: *The Infinite Game*.

As I finished reading this book, I reflected on these concepts and how timely they are to the global pandemic situation under which we are all operating. In *The Infinite Game*, Sinek discusses why resilience is *preferable* to stability. He writes, "A company built for resilience is a company that is structured to last forever. This is different from a company built for stability. Stability, by its very definition, is about remaining the same."

Black Swan events, chaos theory, and the unpredictability of human behavior and Mother Nature add up to a world that consistently defies our confident forecasts. Not even thoughtful scenario planning will enable us to imagine the precise futures our organization will face or the obstacles we will inevitably encounter. Therefore, resilience is fundamental to mission success.

At the core, many nonprofits already utilize resilience mindsets in the development of their service programs. For example, national youth-serving nonprofits often recognize resilience as a quality that our children need to thrive:

- **Camp Fire's** methodology is called Thrive{ology}. Camp Fire leaders across the organization's 52 councils work to inspire a growth mindset in the kids they serve so they can, "Learn to push past obstacles, take risks, believe you can learn a new skill at any time, and don't give up." Why? The Camp Fire team explains that "Kids and adults with a [growth mindset](#) are more successful in life."
- Resilience is also a core value for the **YMCA of the USA** and the 2,400 Ys across the country. The [YMCA of San Diego](#) reminds us that "All children face challenges throughout their upbringing that can range from minor disappointments to traumatic experiences. YMCA Youth & Family Services works with youth to develop coping skills to manage these trials and overcome them successfully."
- And in a thought-provoking white paper titled [The Resilience Factor: A Key to Leadership in African American and Hispanic Girls](#), the **Girl Scout Research Institute** describes "three main factors" that "play a role in developing the resilience of youth: 1. the young person herself or himself, 2. the family,

which provides a significant degree of functioning, positive support, bonding, and stable discipline, and 3. the community/environment, which provides a certain level of social support.”

Resilience—the ability to adapt positively to adversity—is key to health and well-being throughout our lives. A [scholarly article from the National Institutes of Health](#) reports that “Resilience scores have been demonstrated to be positively correlated with mental health and physical functioning of the elderly.” The article cites additional studies that explore “how resilience ameliorated the negative effect of adverse events on health and well-being.” And while these studies focus on physical health, we can make correlations to how resiliency bolsters organizational health as well.

Make Time for Resilience

Members of our team were recently talking about the COVID-19 crisis with a leader from a consulting client. The leader spoke of the “fallacy of crisis management,” sharing his view that, in the middle of a crisis, it feels as though you are focused on the most significant risks. A true crisis consumes your focus and attention. This means that it’s very hard to focus on significant issues that may be barely visible on the distant horizon. Those hard to focus on issues may be another crisis in the making.

Looking ahead to the horizon may feel like a luxury your organization simply can’t afford during this unprecedented time. But if we care about the people and community-serving missions of the organizations we steward with pride, we must look up and out to the vistas in the distance. As you look to that horizon, carve out time today to infuse your organization with the resilience it will need to safely transition to a brighter tomorrow. Consider the following steps to help you focus on the future:

- **Size up your scalability.** If you’ve recently shuttered or scaled-back programs, it is unlikely that you’ll be able to bring them all back to life after the pandemic subsides. Which programs are most vital to advancing the mission of your organization? Which services or activities are scalable should you face another disruption that you can’t avoid? While it’s hard to prioritize programs that at one time seemed vital and viable, take time now to imagine your ramp back up to what will be a new ‘normal’ for your nonprofit.
- **Reimagine the return to work.** Just as you’ll need to ramp up to a new normal in programs and services, it’s unlikely you’ll be able to bring all of your furloughed staff back on board at the same time. Some of those staff will have moved on to new careers, organizations, or even early retirement. Imagine what your process will look like; think about the phases of scaling up, reflect on how you’ll build a team to tackle tomorrow’s challenges and brilliant opportunities.
- **Design your do-over.** If you knew that a pandemic was coming that would force program closures, school closures, and social distancing, what would you have done? Make a list of what you would have done differently given six months’ advance notice that COVID-19 was coming. What steps would you have taken to ensure a smoother transition to radically scaled back operations? Use these lists as hints for scalability options when you build your resiliency plans for future business interruptions.
- **Identify and embrace your ‘one thing.’** In a previous edition of the RISK eNews, I shared Gary Keller’s advice from his book, *The ONE Thing*. Keller urges readers to set aside exhaustive lists and focus on ONE thing that has the potential to make a significant difference. Keller writes, “To-do lists tend to be long; success lists are short. One pulls you in all directions; the other aims you in a specific direction.” What ONE thing can you do today and tomorrow to help your nonprofit bounce back from loss, disappointment, and circumstances beyond your control?
- **Adopt a repeatable regimen.** The best path to get your body—or your nonprofit—back in shape is to choose a manageable routine. Simon Sinek explains: “We can’t simply go to the gym for nine hours and expect to be in shape. However, if we go to the gym every single day for twenty minutes, we will absolutely get into shape.” With this potent advice in mind, identify a handful of routines you can implement to begin re-building a strong organization to advance your mission.

Sadly, most organizations aren’t resilient. According to the consultancy McKinsey, [most companies last two decades or less and only the minority endure over time](#). Resiliency is a quality that we wish for ourselves, our loved ones, and our cherished organizations. We can’t achieve it overnight or become resilient by wishing and hoping. Small steps taken every day are required to slowly and steadily prepare for a brighter future. What steps and strategies will you embrace for your resiliency routine?

Additional Nonprofit Risk Management Center resources for resiliency:

- [“No Business Continuity Plan? Take These 4 Steps,”](#) Risk eNews
- [“Toss Your To-Do List,”](#) Risk eNews
- [“Right Back At It: Fostering Organizational Resilience,”](#) Risk News
- [“Ready, Mindset, Go!,”](#) Risk eNews