

Your Next New Normal: 5 Things to Do to Prepare for What's Next



By Whitney Thomey

Lead Consultant & Risk Ethnologist

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: Business Continuity Planning, Crisis Management, Crisis Communications

At the beginning of 2020, no one could have predicted that a pandemic would knock the world off its proverbial axis or that the ripple effect would touch nearly every aspect of daily life. Organizations have been forced to grapple with an ever-evolving challenge that has required leaders and team members to have patience, creativity, and empathy. Many nonprofit leaders have questions about how to sustain mission-serving programs and services and what it looks like to be present in a community struck by a pandemic. Nine months into this pandemic, nearly everyone is aching for normalcy.

But what does the *next* new normal look like? Projections have indicated the possibility of a COVID-19 vaccine by early 2021. However, with the sharp rise in positive tests and hospitalizations, many communities are on the precipice of a second wave. And the second wave of the pandemic may require additional changes in practice, policies, and protocols.

What can your organization do today to prepare for a second wave and to think about transitioning to your next new normal? The NRMC team offers the following five tips for preparing your organization, even as the future remains uncertain.

1. Dust off your Business Continuity Plans!

If you updated your Business Continuity Plan (BCP) during COVID-19, make sure that your plans are appropriately scaled and contain clear direction and documentation to weather the path out of the pandemic. While health officials are optimistic that we might see a transition toward normalcy before the end of 2021, organizations may need to continue to shift and pivot as circumstances remain tenuous.

Check to see whether your BCP captures any new roles or responsibilities that your organization has identified as essential. Ensure that contact information is up to date for any and all vendors, partners, and affiliates whose support and services were vital to your resilience in 2020. Take a hard look at the scope of operations; if your programs or services have changed to better support your community, identify which areas you could begin winding down and reallocating resources toward other mission-critical activities. If creating a BCP is on your 'to do' list, but you're unsure where to begin, check out our affordable web app: [My Business Continuity Plan](#).

2. Build in potential pivot points for your live events.

It's unlikely that live events in 2021 will look like they did before the pandemic. Business travel may be restricted or unaffordable, and social distancing practices continue to be a wise precaution. The NRMC team recommends that as nonprofits plan their 2021 events, teams examine where they can build in pivot points to

maximize attendance and engagement. If your organization was hoping to host live events, start exploring the options for converting to or hosting a hybrid event.

Dig into the contract terms of venues you will be using for in-person events, and make certain you understand the venue's options, flexibility, and penalties should you wind up changing the format of your event, canceling it altogether, or postponing. Many event spaces offer hybrid and virtual event modalities; packages and options may be available within the confines of the original contract terms. Don't risk being caught without a viable contingency plan if a regional virus surge emerges unexpectedly or travel bans prevent attendees from coming to your live event.

3. Recognize that flexibility is a prized commodity.

Nonprofit leaders need to recognize that all institutions will move at different rates of speed during the transition. Staff members may continue to grapple with school and childcare closures, at-home learning, and other challenges outside of work. Maintaining transparent communication and being open to creative scheduling options will allow dedicated team members the flexibility they need to meet family and work obligations.

Check in regularly with staff and ask how they're getting along, if they need assistance, or what stress points worry them most. Encourage team members to make new connections and lean on each other for support. Some creative solutions implemented during the pandemic include "learning pods" or groups of work colleagues who can share questions and tips for at-home learners, new reimbursement programs for parents whose children require tutoring, and community-building lunchtime video chats that break down the isolation some have felt during the pandemic.

Employees and leaders should know their rights under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) and understand when paid leave can be requested and when it cannot. The Department of Labor (DOL) has provided a [FAQ page](#) to answer various scenarios relating to this transition period.

4. Consider adding a COVID-19 Task Force or Committee to stay on top of guidelines, recommendations, and regulations relating to return-to-work.

If you haven't already tasked a group of team members with monitoring government and public health agency recommendations, consider adding this to your pandemic response. Ask for volunteers from diverse functions in your organization. Having a cross-functional team will ensure that recommendations will be applied optimally and equitably for all teams. If your organization has a risk team or another cross-functional group that meets regularly, consider adding COVID-19 related tasks to their agendas.

Keep in mind that national and regional health officials may have conflicting guidance and reopening requirements may differ based on local virus surges. Nonprofit leadership teams need to evaluate the recommendations provided by trusted officials when making decisions about a reopening plan. Your COVID-19 Task Force can help reduce the burden by collecting and summarizing the information provided from these channels.

The National Safety Council has created [SAFER: Safe Actions for Employee Returns](#), a collection of resources to help answer questions about how to deal with the next new normal. These resources include a general framework, sample employee surveys, and even "playbooks," with various checklists and topics for organizations to consider as they reopen.

5. Ramp up communication.

Early on, it became apparent that situations relating to the pandemic evolved quickly; therefore, nonprofits needed to respond just as quickly. That might mean making rapid course corrections in programs or changing team members' workstations or locations. Staying on top of communication and proactively sending out information dramatically reduces the risk that frustration and confusion will run high. Leaders should feel comfortable keeping staff informed even when transition plans are in the early stages. Involving the team in the planning process will not only keep the lines of communication open, but it will alleviate the fear and uncertainty that often comes with receiving directives without knowing the "why."

When considering your communication plan, ask yourself:

- Who are my key stakeholders, and what's essential for them to know and understand as we evolve our pandemic response plan? What might these stakeholders want (versus need) to know?
- What are our best tools for reaching the widest audience? Are we making sure that our communications are clear, credible, jargon-free, and easy to access?
- Are our communications frequent enough to ensure team members and those we serve are unlikely to be surprised by any necessary changes to protocols, but not so frequent to be perceived as 'noise'? (Did you

know that an estimated [43% of people](#) regularly delete or ignore long-winded emails?)

- Have we kept our contact lists up to date for volunteers and furloughed team members so that when the time arises, we can give proper notice and relay the plan for restarting operations that have been curtailed?

The path forward for nonprofit leaders will be as varied as the missions they advance. Transitioning your nonprofit to the next new normal should be led with empathy, understanding, and flexibility. These values will allow your organization to be mindful of the challenges dedicated employees are facing while you preserve and fortify mission-critical activities.

Whitney Thomey is Project Manager at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Whitney welcomes your comments and questions about resilience and preparing for the next new normal, at 703.777.3504 or Whitney@nonprofitrisk.org.