

The Future is Now: Preparing for the Unknown Crisis

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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.

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.

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 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.

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](https://www.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.

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 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.

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.

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.

Internal communication has two primary functions during a crisis. First, internal communication about what 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.

External communication—the second component of crisis 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.

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

Learn from the past.

For many teams, 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.