

How to Simplify and Streamline During a Crisis



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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

Across the U.S., and the world, many nonprofit teams are confronting decisions with potentially devastating impacts. The risk of losing a primary source or stream of funding—a risk that tops the list of risk worries for many nonprofits—has moved from the distant horizon to the front burner.

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.

Simplify With Three Categories

At NRMC we believe that “simplify” and “streamline” are keywords for coping with disruption. If you face an existential threat or mission-disrupting event or decision over which you have no control, gather your team to take these actions.

Step 1: Sort key activities and strategies into 3 major categories:

- Category #1: Things we must continue doing for as long as we can
- Category #2: Things we must stop doing to free up space and resources
- Category #3: Things we need to start doing without delay

Step 2: Reflect on key questions about the priorities in each category. For example:

Category #1: Continue Doing

- What makes this activity or function vital at this time and into the foreseeable future?
- What issues or factors could make it difficult—or impossible—to continue doing this?
- What assumptions are we making? What if we’re wrong?

- In what ways should we change how we're doing these things? (e.g., teams leading this, systems/approaches, etc.)
- What don't we know—but need to find out—to continue doing the items in this category?

Category #2: Stop Doing

- What are the potential downside consequences of ceasing these functions or activities?
- How can we wind down these activities in a manner that reflects our values?
- What are some of the possible unintended consequences of stopping these programs or activities?
- How can we lessen or mitigate those potential consequences?
- What are the clear or known upsides of ceasing these functions? How might we leverage those upsides? (e.g., redeploying teams to activities in Category #1 or Category #3)
- What assumptions are we making? What if we're wrong?
- What don't we know—but need to find out—to stop doing the activities or shutter programs in this category?

Category #3: Start Doing

- What makes this new activity or function vital?
- What assumptions are we making? What if we're wrong?
- What are the options—different ways to the same ends/goals—associated with each activity on this list?
- What can we do to choose the best possible option based on what we know or can find out in a reasonable amount of time?
- What don't we know—but need to find out—to begin doing the items in this category?

Make Time for Resilience

During the COVID pandemic, a colleague told us about 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 (possibilities). But the truth is that many leaders focus too intently on what they know (or think they know) about their present circumstances, and spend too little time discussing knowledge gaps and looking ahead at the horizon.

During times of crisis, looking at the horizon feels like a luxury. But because we care about the people and 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 team and organization with the resilience it will need to imagine and safely navigate to a brighter future. Consider the following to help you focus:

Plan ahead to resume operations.

If you're planning to shutter or scale back programs you may be able to resurrect in the future, jot down a short list of steps and strategies to bring those programs back on line. What would be required? What are the 'nice-to-do' tasks—to tackle now and then—that will reduce friction during a period of resumption?

Design your do-over.

If you knew many months ago that policy changes or other developments would necessitate program closures or restructuring, what would you have done? Make a list of what you would have done differently given six months' advance notice that the crisis you're facing today was coming. What steps would you have taken to ensure a smoother transition to scale back or re-engineer operations?

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 mission bounce back from loss, disappointment, and circumstances beyond your control? Keep asking that question throughout the period of crisis for your nonprofit.

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 realistic routines you can implement to begin re-building a strong organization to advance your mission.

Resiliency is a quality that we wish for ourselves, our loved ones, and our cherished nonprofit organizations. We can’t achieve it overnight or become resilient by wishing and hoping. It takes small steps every day to slowly and steadily prepare for a brighter future. What steps and strategies will you embrace to foster resilience?

Additional NRMC Resilience Resources

- “No Business Continuity Plan? Take These 4 Steps,” Risk eNEWS (<https://nonprofitrisk.org/resources/e-news/no-business-continuity-plan-take-these-4-steps/>)
- “Toss Your To-Do List,” Risk eNEWS (<https://nonprofitrisk.org/resources/e-news/toss-your-to-do-list/>)
- “Right Back At It: Fostering Organizational Resilience,” (<https://nonprofitrisk.org/resources/articles/right-back-fostering-organizational-resilience/>)
- “Ready, Mindset, Go!,” Risk eNEWS (<https://nonprofitrisk.org/resources/e-news/ready-mindset-go/>)

Note to readers: If you have found, created, or adapted a resilience-building tool or worksheet and you’re willing to share it with other RISK eNews readers, please send it to info@nonprofitrisk.org.