

8 Things Nonprofit Leaders Can Do for Their Teams in Tough Times

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: HR Risk and Employment Practices

The past few years have been especially challenging for nonprofits, their teams, and the people they serve. You've likely steered your team through many challenges, from budget strains to community grief about injustice and acts of violence. And there will be many more challenges to navigate. Here are some ways to take the best possible care of your team members when times get tough.

Take time to understand and address your own emotions. You can't support your team or model healthy behavior if you neglect yourself. Write down what you feel, whether it's sadness, anger, frustration, all of the above, or something else. Ensure your basic needs like sleep and nourishing food are met, so your body has time and sustenance to process those emotions.

Acknowledge what's happening. Tell your team you know things are tough and you understand people may be anxious. Name what's making things difficult: losing a big contract, an act of violence impacting people you serve, a leadership change that shakes the team up. Let people know, individually and as a team, that it's OK for them to talk to you about these things, and it's also OK if they don't want to.

Don't automatically cancel social activities, but read the room. Events like a virtual happy hour or team-building outing can provide a needed stress release during difficult times. Use good judgment: if you are grieving someone's death or announcing layoffs, put that day's event on pause. And always make social activities optional. What feels restorative to one person might drain another.

Set clear priorities. Challenging times often bring confusion about what happens next. Every step you take to clearly communicate expectations about what work must get done and what can wait will make people feel more safe and secure.

Revisit expectations. Most people will be less productive during difficult times. Accept that and work with people where they are. If you've set clear guidelines about what work must get completed, you should be able to let a lot of things slide, at least temporarily.

Make your team members aware of formal and informal support resources. Share information about mental health or career counseling resources appropriate to the situation. Communicate how you're willing to support your team; that they can ask for a mental health day anytime without details, call you during working hours to talk if something's worrying them, etc.

Be true to yourself, but don't make yourself the focus. If you have conflicting feelings about change at work or issues in your community, you can be honest about that. But don't dwell on it, and don't steal air from people and communities in your work who may be more directly impacted than you.

Keep advocating for resources and reasonable workloads for your team. Even if immediate change doesn't seem possible, circumstances can shift. Regular advocacy for your team can shake resources loose in those moments when new possibilities unexpectedly show up.

Resources

- [Managing in Terrible Times – Lara Hogan](#)
- [How to Be a Supportive Manager When Times Are Tough – Harvard Business Review](#)
- [A Psychologist’s 5-Step Guide for Resilient Leadership When Everything Is Going Wrong – Fast Company](#)
- [Supporting Your Employees During Hard Times: A Manager’s Guide – University of California, San Francisco](#)