

Don't Be Naïve: Plan to Survive Your Next Crisis



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Although interest in crisis management appears to be growing in the nonprofit sector, many leaders continue to naively believe that a crisis-free history, compelling mission and dedicated staff create a protective shield against crisis events. An important truth about crisis events is that no organization is immune. A crisis is most often an event you didn't see coming, which takes you by surprise, and tests the mettle of even your most experienced staff and volunteer leaders. Another truth about crisis events is that even though you are unlikely to face the exact set of circumstances in your worst nightmare, ANY time spent preparing for a crisis will serve you well when a crisis unfolds in your nonprofit.

What's the Risk?

In our experience as a risk advisor to the nonprofit sector, we have observed that most nonprofits seem to survive the crisis events they face. This means that both prepared and unprepared nonprofits generally weather the crisis tornados they thought wouldn't touch down in their backyards. We attribute the high survival rate to what we refer to as "resilience DNA" — an intuitive skill set that enables most nonprofit CEOs, boards and organizations to get tossed in the air and still land on their respective feet. So if we are pretty good at surviving crisis events without preparation, why devote precious time to crisis management?

Three Reasons

We believe there are at least three compelling reasons to devote time and resources to crisis management:

1. **To avoid collateral damage from a crisis.** You may survive a crisis without preparation, but although you survived your nonprofit may have sustained some avoidable harm, such as morale-crushing stress on staff, loss of confidence by the board, and the diversion of funds needed for your mission.
2. **To inspire confidence.** The most effective risk management programs inspire confidence among stakeholders. Confidence at the board table frees up the board to focus on the strategic direction of the nonprofit, rather than spend its precious time obsessively focused on operational details.
3. **To fortify your mission.** Without any preparation, your mission will take a beating during a crisis. Time, energy, and other resources will be drawn away from critical programs and services to plug the holes, stop the bleeding, and deal with the mess that you might have been able to avoid.

Crisis Tips From Our Expert

Stephen Drachler offers the following tips for nonprofit leaders working to fine-tune crisis communications:

- **Replace No Comment with a Plan** – Drachler notes that an “ineffective communications strategy” is the Achilles Heel for many nonprofits in crisis. And in the absence of a communications strategy, “no comment” is the default strategy! “No comment is the kiss of death to an organization’s credibility,” says Drachler. He adds that “When ‘no comment’ is the response to an interview request, an organization is likely to be judged guilty as charged. And after that, it may be an uphill climb to restore a reputation to its prior status.”
- **Watch the Clock** — According to Drachler, for many years, organizations had perhaps an hour to respond to media inquiries about a crisis, before a reporter would move on and find another source. But in today’s digital age, the timer is set for 15 minutes. So regardless of what you’ll say, you need to make sure that a trained and prepared “someone”... (and their designated backup) is ready to respond without delay.

The Letter “C”

The letter “C” is often used as a clever way to remind leaders about what to do to prepare for and survive a crisis. Some of our favorite “C” words for crisis management include:

- **Calm** — Your chance of surviving with mission intact and little or no avoidable damage increases substantially if you’re able to stay calm during a crisis. And remember that during a crisis the focus is on senior leaders: your sense of calm will inspire others to remain calm as well.
- **Context** — Don’t forget context when trouble lands at your doorstep; take action with your mission, history, service model and clientele as an always present backdrop. Be the organization your most supportive stakeholders believe you to be.
- **Connections** — A common mistake is to wade through a crisis without getting outside help. Now’s the time to use your connections to fortify your mission. Don’t be a hero; be a connector.
- **Compassion** — Never forget that you are in the compassion business. Failing to show compassion for any presumed victims will cost you dearly.
- **Capable** — Don’t pretend to have all the answers when it’s clear there are unknowns; instead, promise to get information or answers to questions you’re getting from the media and other stakeholders.
- **Current** — Provide up to date information to key stakeholder groups as the crisis unfolds. Update basic information on your nonprofit before a crisis erupts, so that you can focus on the new events in the moment, rather than having to re-do an outdated mission statement or board roster.
- **Concise** — Clarity is key when communicating to employees, volunteers, the board, clientele or the media during a crisis. Don’t ramble; use well-understood terms to describe what’s happening and how your nonprofit is responding to the crisis.

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