

Take 10: Resume and Thrive Strategies



By Melanie Lockwood Herman and Whitney Claire Thomey

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: Business Continuity Planning, Facility, Program and Transportation Safety

The effects of a global pandemic have caused many nonprofits to quickly scale back and shutter programs, send staff home, and redeploy resources to stop the spread of COVID-19. No organization was immune from the need to make fast, and in some cases, immediate decisions about what services were mission-critical and how to pivot to maintain safe social distancing and isolation mandates issued by government officials. We are now entering a new phase of the pandemic that has nonprofit leaders asking questions about resumption and resilience. Restoring and revitalizing your organization will require more thoughtful, deliberate decisions. Instead of suddenly flipping a switch to restart “business as usual,” nonprofit leaders must ponder the preparations necessary to foster a safe workplace grounded in future-forward, mission-advancing principles.

Below, we refer to the initial phase of response as Phase Zero and the next step in reopening as Phase One. Phases may be described differently in your area.



1. Put your faith in trusted, trained advisors.

If we sincerely care about the people we serve and the people who serve, we must follow, as best we can, the advice of public health officials. Unless you are a public health official or medical professional, federal, state and local public health officials should be your go-to resource for information and insights on when and how to resume operations.

Sure, the politicians have a bully pulpit and a persuasive resumption message; however, political agendas may assess risks associated with this pandemic in a manner that is incongruent with your organization's risk appetite and antithetical to your values. Rebooting the economy and returning to your mission's agenda are appealing in the face of the social isolation we've all been experiencing. However, we urge you to utilize guidance backed by science to arrive at your own assessment of when it's safe to return to work.

2. Put your team on a pedestal.

There's no better time than now to embody the expression, "There's no "I" in team." You may have seen that location hasn't mattered when it was necessary to put in the hard work to keep your nonprofit functioning through this crisis. Many team members have come through for your mission while working remotely. Managers and nonprofit leaders can demonstrate faith and trust by allowing valued team members to continue working where they feel safe until they are ready to return. Put your team's feelings, worries, stresses, and needs ahead of your own.

Conduct a figurative temperature check *before* announcing resumption strategies. Obtaining buy-in from employees enhances trust, and lets your team know that you care about their wellbeing, not just about the bottom line. When soliciting buy-in from team members about their thoughts on resumption, use a variety of communication methods. While it's crucial to have open discussions during your staff meetings and touch-base

calls, also remember to include channels that offer more privacy. Encourage all staff to reach out in the manner they feel most comfortable to discuss what their return-to-work might look like.

3. Provide the resources needed for the job.

For employees who will continue to work from home indefinitely, resolve to provide the equipment and support they need to be successful. Headset for better audio on all those Zoom calls? Check. If helpful equipment or resources were left behind at your offices, arrange a safe time for staff to collect items that will enhance their work-from-home experience.

Think beyond remote resources; consider the requirements for keeping team members safe in your offices and facilities. When staff return to the office, provide them with a “welcome back” care package that includes masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer. Supplying these essentials takes a stressful weight off the shoulders of employees and lets them know that their health and wellbeing are top-of-mind to your organization.

4. Reimagine your workspace.

Many nonprofits have made the move to open floor plan office design. An office configuration that was intended to enhance collaboration now poses serious hurdles for ensuring the health and safety of your staff members. If your agency has literally removed office walls and previously encouraged team members to ‘hot desk,’ or meet in small ‘huddle rooms,’ you must rethink that configuration before permitting team members to return to work.

An entire office reconfiguration might not be in the budget. But know that there are changes that can be made that won’t break the bank. Reducing employee density is one way to make your current configuration work without ditching all of your office furniture. Re-purpose spacious offices once reserved for executives for use by 2-3 person teams. Consider adding “sanitation stations” in communal shared spaces like kitchens and coffee bars so employees can easily wipe down buttons and handles after use. Let employees know that there is an expectation of shared responsibility for keeping the office safe and healthy during the “Phase One” reboot.

5. Get your facilities safety-ready.

During “Phase Zero” of the pandemic, you may have shuttered your physical offices. Before you bring team members back, you’ll need to make sure that systems are functioning after being shut down for some time and that your offices are fully stocked.

Double-check that you have plenty of sanitation and cleaning supplies (and check expiration dates). If your team manages your offices, check that cleaning equipment is in good working order. Treat all surfaces with recommended disinfectants ([see the CDC’s guidelines you’re unsure](#)) and change HVAC filters. Test and assess office mechanical equipment systems such as: water systems, HVAC, and fire and life safety systems to determine if any maintenance is required for systems that have been offline.

6. Be kind; be flexible.

Grumpy boss behaviors are out; kindness is in. Compassionate leadership brings with it a host of positive effects. Now, more than ever, the shift to conscientious caring at the leadership level is proving that this method of leadership goes far beyond just a nicety. [Forbes published the results of a recent study](#) showing that compassionate leaders witness outcomes such as leaps in production (sometimes in excess of 50%), decreased levels of stress (28%), increases in a feeling of work-life balance, and positive emotions at work.

[Gary Burnison of Korn Ferry identifies vulnerability](#) as one of the most important traits of a CEO. Is this surprising? The term ‘vulnerable’ probably wasn’t in the most recent posting for the CEO role! Burnison writes that “(v)ulnerable leaders incite organizational curiosity, creating a culture of ‘collective genius.’ Rather than people being told what to do, they should be inspired about what to think about.” In the post-COVID world, this is precisely what your organization needs to thrive and poise your organization for mission success.

7. Blow the dust off of timely, essential policies.

What policies, you say? Revisit policies that matter to your mission; update them so they provide helpful

guidance and guardrails for team members who will have lots of questions when they re-emerge from quarantine and sheltering-at-home to tackle your mission head-on!

Make sure policies are cohesive and not just cobbled together. You might have guest and visitor policies on the books from long before the pandemic; these need to be updated or rewritten to note when access restrictions are necessary and how to execute them. If you have work-from-home policies, these might need retooling to be more comprehensive, cover new technological advances, and include flexibility. Other policies to give a closer look at could be: temp worker policies, staff travel policies, policies governing care of vulnerable clients, and flex-time/flex-leave policies for staff who are caregivers for young children or elderly family members.

8. Take something off the table.

If you haven't already done so, identify at least one project that simply isn't feasible or no longer makes sense this year. Stop holding on to yesteryear's hopes and wishes for 2020. Take a long hard look at what's possible this year and help your team focus their energies, enthusiasm, and talents on your new targets, goals, aspirations, and 'must-do' projects. Margareta Magnusson explains in her book *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning*, that "Life will become more pleasant and comfortable if we get rid of some of the abundance." Magnusson is referring to the clutter that complicates our personal lives; many nonprofits are guilty of accumulating new goals, activities, and offerings until they are bursting at the seams.

Look at your nonprofit through the eyes of a startup and reimagine the future of your organization! This might mean reevaluating your mission and how it impacts your community. It might mean making some bold directional changes or rethinking your top three strategic priorities. Drive change that is necessary to survive in a new Post-COVID world.

*Note: We recommend that any meetings that can be conducted remotely, **should be** held remotely for the remainder of 2020!*

9. Coach your team through change.

In [Recovery Readiness: A How-To Guide for Reopening Your Workplace](#), the team at Cushman & Wakefield reminds us to keep our teams informed, help teams become adept with virtual tools, and find ways to connect your expectations and new assignments back to the core mission of your nonprofit.

Coaching through change isn't a new concept. Adopting a coaching mindset during the recovery phases of the pandemic will strengthen your staff's trust in your leadership. Keep in mind as you coach your employees that asking great questions, listening effectively, and offering compassion will help to build and strengthen the relationship between you and your team. In the Harvard Business Review article "[Coaching for Change](#)" the authors remind us to use words like "help, not 'guide,' 'lead,' 'push,' or 'pull.'" Using the right words is essential in conveying the direction of your assistance.

10. Reconnect with everyone in your ecosystem.

Connection in this time of social distancing has been essential. Staying connected is necessary for maintaining relationships and keeping a team intact and in sync. Meaningful connections are also fundamental to ease anxiety and respond in our communities. Now that many of us are looking at thoughtful ways to restart and resume services, it's vital that you reconnect with everyone in your ecosystem. If you haven't already reached out to anyone who might be helping you in 2020, now's the time. Open the lines of communication with volunteers, customers, partners, and vendors and find out how they've been faring during the pandemic. Ask how *THEY* have been doing! Get a sense if they are still in a position to work with you. Based on their resumption plans and how their organizations have fared, you may need to make amendments or adjustments to existing agreements and contracts.

The process of resumption after a period of extended crisis beckons us to look inward at our charitable missions and look outward at what's possible in this brave new world. Grounding strategy in conversations and connection, relying on trusted advisors, and being open to reimagining is only half the battle. Your organization likely had to rapidly implement business continuity strategies that were only theoretical before COVID-19. Now

you're navigating what resumption looks like. More than ever, it's imperative to use these strategies and lessons learned to build your organization's resilience so that if the world faces a resurgence in the fall, or any other serious disruption of 'normal', that event won't cause your mission to buckle at the knees.

Below, we have curated a collection of helpful resources that may help as you navigate plans and answer resumption strategy questions.

Melanie Herman is the Executive Director and Whitney Thomey is a Project Manager at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Melanie and Whitney welcome your questions and feedback about resumption strategies and business continuity planning at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org, Whitney@nonprofitrisk.org, or 703.777.3504.

Resumption Resources

- "[HRInsights: Designing a Post-corona Office](#)," AHT Insurance
- "[Get Recession Ready](#)," ASAE
- "[Safe Work Playbook: An interactive guide for COVID-19 Pandemic Preparedness and Response](#)," Lear
- "[To weather a crisis, build a network of teams](#)," McKinsey & Company