

Right Back At It: Fostering Organizational Resilience

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“The difference between a strong man and a weak one is that the former does not give up after a defeat.” – Woodrow Wilson

Resilience is often defined as the ability to recover after a setback or in the face of adversity, or having the capacity to adapt to new challenges. For many nonprofits, resilience is essential for every day mission-advancing work and is not only relevant in the face of an existential crisis.

Working to build resiliency at your organization can not only prepare your team for a crisis event, but also enable your team to take on higher-risk, higher-reward ventures, which less resilient teams could not withstand.

Risk Management and Resiliency

Inevitably, at some point in your organization’s life cycle, a crisis situation will arise that will challenge your organization in difficult ways and may even threaten the organization’s future. For resilient organizations, embracing the challenges arising from these situations and learning lessons from dealing with difficulties plays a role in ensuring future success. Nonprofits that are just beginning a risk management journey may not have had the time to focus on developing resilience. Furthermore, because the initial investments into cultivating a resilient culture do not yet exist, there may be a lack of risk awareness on the part of organization leaders and key constituents.

By understanding how resilience is a necessary partner to crisis management preparation and by engaging leaders in risk management conversation, your team can begin the process of building resiliency.

The Many Faces of Resiliency

Resiliency can take many forms for a nonprofit. In some cases, an organization may have resiliency built into its mission, and leaders may bring personal qualities that enhance the resiliency of the organization. Most of the time, however, nonprofit leadership devotes ample thought and effort into fostering resilience in all corners of the organization.

Some resilience enhancements will focus on management philosophy, integrated throughout the nonprofit, while others might be more specific to one operational area. A few facets of resilience are detailed below.

Redundancy

One key component of resilience is redundancy, or having more than one contingency plan in place to remedy a crisis or to achieve success. Though the term *redundancy* often evokes negative sentiments, in risk management practice, redundancy is essential. In the case of crisis management and preparedness, resilience is fortified by increasing redundancy in risk practices.

Increasing redundancy at your nonprofit might be as simple as implementing an organization-wide emergency

notification system or training a second or third person as back-up for important operations such as accessing your nonprofit's vendor records and contact information. It might also invite complexity, such as having a secondary system in place for notifying staff and participants that a facility is in lock-down if your primary contact system is not working.

Talent Development and Leadership

Another way that nonprofit teams intentionally enhance resiliency is by emphasizing talent development, or hiring a workforce that has resilient characteristics and helps nurture a resilient culture for the organization. Resilient characteristics include humility, patience, the ability to focus on the present, and a drive to support and build up coworkers and others.

Nonprofits that focus on talent development may find that the culture of an organization is already formed around a unity of purpose. A key trait among many nonprofit leaders who encourage resilience is a positive focus on the empowerment and support of peers and direct reports. A rare but effective resiliency trait is the desire to make oneself—as a team leader or team member—obsolete to the point that other team members have been empowered to take on your role if a crisis or personnel transition demands it. The journey towards organizational resilience can conflict with individual egos and often requires selfless service by nonprofit team members.

While seeking to hire individuals that display resilient traits is important, developing these characteristics amongst existing staff and volunteers is also vital, along with emphasizing cross-training and creating succession plans to manage transitions when organization leaders depart for any reason.

Business Continuity

Business continuity planning (BCP) is sometimes implemented in concert with crisis planning, though BCP is typically broader in nature and prepares a team to respond to a variety of challenging events. For example, a nonprofit team might need to implement a business continuity plan when the office sprinkler system malfunctions and floods the facility, damaging equipment and files. Though the event might not be deemed a "crisis," it warrants enacting contingency plans, perhaps for telework or off-site work, as well as to repair to organization's space, equipment, and data.

Tips for Enhancing Resiliency

- **Consider drivers of resilience that are unique to your nonprofit.** Many of the things that can be done to strengthen resiliency within your nonprofit are common in organizations of all kinds; however, some resiliency enhancements will be very specific to your nonprofit's mission, the context in which you operate, the audiences you serve, how your programs are run and managed, and so forth. When planning to bolster resilience, assessing your organization's special traits could help you identify and bolster vulnerabilities, while also helping you build upon existing strengths. For example, building resiliency at a large nonprofit with diverse facilities and programs might require leaders from different those silos to come together to figure out what facility-specific and program-specific crisis planning must be done, as well as where efforts and lessons can be shared or replicated. A team that uses a generic crisis management plan or a singular approach to crisis response across a diverse array of programs and offices could be positioning itself for disaster, when response doesn't account for nuanced needs.
- **Foster a culture of candor, trust and mutual support.** Culture is often considered to come from the top of an organization, stemming from the attitudes and actions of the board, the Executive Director/CEO and the senior management team. In reality, culture is affected by all team members in an organization, and can shift gradually as team members come and go. Essential to building a resilient culture—one that can bounce back in the wake of a crisis or other challenging event—is fostering a sense of mutual support and trust throughout your organization. Build up each member of your team. Encourage individuals to speak up when they need help, when they have ideas, and when they have concerns about risks, organizational dysfunction, misconduct, or any other challenges your team might face. A culture that stimulates candor, trust, mutually supportive relationships, and open communication will serve as a springboard in a time of crisis.
- **Assume responsibility for enhancing your approach to stewardship.** After a crisis event occurs, whether in the life of an individual or a nonprofit organization, most of us want to retreat to a defensive posture in hopes of limiting reputational damage and minimizing the perception of involvement. This

approach often has the opposite effect on a nonprofit's reputation—causing the public to question the management and future of the organization. Although it is often difficult in the moment, assuming responsibility for your team's lack of preparedness for or involvement in a crisis—whether a breach of the personally identifiable information (PII) of volunteer or donors, or an allegation of sexual abuse by a former employee—can engender trust in your organization over the long-term. Stakeholders and the general public expect nonprofit leaders to apologize, listen, implement improvements, and do better next time. Consider what stance or values your organization might want to project when implicated in a crisis, scandal, or other high profile event. Embrace the opportunity to present a cohesive front to the public, and to share your commitments to learning and your specific plans for improvements on the path forward.

- **Commit to cultivating real change.** Devise and stick to an actionable timeline and approach for post-crisis reflection, review, and adaptation. Meaningful learning from past crisis events might include engaging in dialogue with peer organizations, conducting after action reviews with internal teams, and honestly reflecting on the many failures, errors, or oversights that might have caused or exacerbated a crisis. While your team focuses on dealing with the here-and-now of the crisis and getting back on track with your mission-fulfilling work, you must also consider what *will* or *should* change as a result of a crisis event. If the crisis was an act of child abuse after an unauthorized person gained access to a facility where services are provided for children, how will you ensure that this cannot happen in the future, and what will you do if it does? How will you implement effective and reasonable safeguards that address the concerns of your stakeholders—all while balancing the need to continue taking some risks in order to serve youth and advance your mission? Dedicate ample time to having the difficult conversations about what went wrong and why in order to learn from the past and plan more effectively for the future.
- **Embrace opportunities to evolve and innovate.** Often, a crisis event will arise in an area within your nonprofit that is not as robust as it could be. In this type of situation, a crisis may be the catalyst you need to change and evolve your organization in a new direction. Once a crisis event is over and you are working to learn from what happened, taking the time to get input from individuals with diverse roles across the organization might shed light on areas that can evolve or be improved for the future. Some ideas or insights from individuals with diverse viewpoints might seem drastic. However, obtaining input from other peer organizations or taking the time to understand the reasoning behind a suggestion might offer a viewpoint you hadn't previously considered. Crisis recovery can also be a good time to renew partnerships with key constituents, including other organizations and volunteer teams. Don't neglect your relationships at a time when they might be crucial for your future.

Finally, a major event can be the right time to review your organization's strategic plan. Although it is likely a plan that is reviewed by a leadership team on a regular basis, a crisis event can affect the primary work of your nonprofit for the short-term, or even in the big picture. Reevaluate the relevance of your organizational goals and strategies to ensure that your nonprofit's direction remains aligned with your mission and the needs of your stakeholders.

Keeping It Together

In the end, a crisis event is unlikely to change the primary purpose or mission of your organization, but don't ignore the possibility that experiencing a crisis will (or should) change how your organization operates on a day-to-day basis. Consider how enhanced systems and processes—and most importantly, new commitments to collective learning and improvement—can enhance your success and your recovery from future crisis events. Take the time to proactively build resiliency into your organizational culture and planning processes, and reap the benefits in the future, when you need them most.