

Fortify Your Pillars of Resilience



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In his chapter on “Resilient, Net Positive Leadership” featured in the book *Certain Uncertainty*, Andrew Winston questions the wisdom of an economy that “values efficiency above all.” Winston explains that while obsessive efficiency “certainly keeps costs down... it’s completely unfit for a vulnerable world.”

Nonprofits across the diverse charitable sector around the globe have first-hand experience with the downsides of our obsession with efficiency. During interviews for [NRM-led risk assessments](#), employees often name these risks:

- The risk of losing a key person— the only person who knows how to do something or has the background needed for a complex responsibility
- The risk of losing a difficult or seemingly impossible to replace primary funding source
- The risk of a cornerstone strategy, project or system failing
- The risk of an externally-arising disruption for which we are unprepared

These risks inspire our team to ask:

- Does your nonprofit have a succession-planning culture?
- Are succession plans written down and known to teams across the organization?
- With respect to key tasks and responsibilities, are staff trained and expected to fill in for colleagues who are absent or unavailable?
- Has your team engaged in business continuity planning? Have you considered maximum acceptable downtimes for key functions, activities or systems?
- Would everyone know what to do, where to go, and how to operate in a true crisis?

In response, we commonly hear about the lack of written succession plans, business continuity strategies, and clear directions and guidance about what to do when the absence of redundant systems and skills triggers a true emergency. Worse, we hear that some plans have been developed but are known only to a very small group at the apex of the organizational chart.

Winston’s reflections on the fundamental pillars of resilience can inform nonprofits across the mission spectrum. He explains that while under stress, people and organizations should rely on three resilience pillars: 1) diversity and redundancy; 2) strong networks (i.e., friends you can trust); and 3) purpose or mission. He writes that “Resilience, most simply, means the ability to survive large swings in the fortunes in any one part of a system (think portfolio theory in investments that has generally outperformed every other strategy), plus greater odds

of bouncing back quicker than others, perhaps even stronger than before.”

We have heard some nonprofit leaders say that despite a lack of general preparedness for COVID-19, their organizations emerged “stronger than before.” We applaud every organization that grew stronger during—and in some ways, because of—the global pandemic. However, we strongly advise against the Pollyanna thinking that “if we survived COVID, we can survive anything!”

While there may be some truth in that optimistic view, at NRMC we believe thoughtful preparation for any disruption or crisis can be invaluable—regardless of the nature of the crisis you experience. With that in mind, we offer the following ways to infuse your mission with greater resilience.

6 Resilience Tactics and Strategies

Champion cross-training. Ask all staff to identify their top 10 responsibilities or tasks and name the colleague who is trained and capable of stepping in. If the answer is “no one,” challenge staff to complete cross training of a suitable colleague by the end of this quarter. Reward and celebrate staff who complete this vital cross training exercise by the deadline.

Embrace MAD. A core activity within business continuity planning is identifying the “maximum acceptable downtime” or MAD for key functions, systems, and activities. NRMC has created a [MAD Worksheet](#) that helps teams prioritize functions and identify resumption strategies.

Take the draft off your crisis management plan. Countless organizations have begun the process of drafting crisis management and crisis communications plans. However, many of these plans languish in a perpetual draft state. Think of your “plan” as an animate resource to update as needed. The word “draft” suggests something is incomplete, versus subject to change. Whatever state the plan is in, it is your plan should a crisis erupt tomorrow.

Remove the cover from your contingency plans. Many nonprofits hide their contingency, crisis and resilience plans or limit access to a small, select few. When a serious disruptive event happens, everyone will need to know what to do. And in the meantime, everyone needs to know that plans have been thoughtfully created and are accessible.

Identify activities that could be paused or delayed in an emergency. Regardless of the source or cause of your next crisis or disruption, we guarantee there will be additional tasks, priorities and areas of focus for your team. In that moment you’ll need to choose between working everyone beyond human capacity, or pausing some projects to make room for the new. Save time in that moment by identifying which activities could be paused, delayed or even cancelled before you’re under strain.

Invest in your network. Andrew Winston writes that “As in nature, organizational resilience comes from having a strong network around you... We all get by with a little help from our friends.” Who are the people and organizations you would turn to for aid in a crisis or disruption uniquely impacting your nonprofit? Is that list readily accessible to anyone who might need it? At NRMC we recently created a centralized list of all our clients and supporters accessible for our entire team. This list would prove invaluable should a crisis erupt and someone unfamiliar with a project needed to share an update or vital information.

In the Foreword to *Certain Uncertainty*, Amy Edmondson writes that “Navigating uncertainty requires input from diverse sources. Making this happen starts with leaders who are open-minded and transparent, prepared to acknowledge that they don’t have all the answers, and willing to listen to and work with others.” These powerful words are a potent resilience recipe. The more you acknowledge that you don’t have all the answers and show your work to prepare, the more trust you’ll inspire in your team—and the more they’ll contribute their own ideas to strengthen your organization.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She recently ditched the mantras of her foolish youth (“sleep is overrated” and “naps are for babies”) in favor of getting more rest. She welcomes your comments and questions about building personal and organizational resilience at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703-777-3504.