

Don't Wait Till You Know Everything to Do Something



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This year, the NRMC team has worked with brilliant nonprofit leaders and teams who feel knocked about by uncertainty.

Some of these talented, thoughtful leaders worry that they don't have enough information about how the [upheaval in nonprofits' federal funding](#) will play out to address it. Others say the amount of turmoil coming at them, from [executive orders](#) to [insurance coverage headaches](#) to [changes in the workforce](#), feels so overwhelming that action seems impossible.

We empathize with them, and with any of you reading who might be feeling the same way. At the same time, we want nonprofit leaders to know there are ways to mitigate risk even when you don't know every nuance of the critical risks you face. A few simple tools and practices can help you prepare for a risk that would impact your nonprofit. You don't have to know exactly what that impact would be.

Here are some tools and practices to turn to when your risk environment feels especially uncertain.

Understand what you can. Before you ponder taking action on a risk, use a tool like [the Risk Bow Tie](#) to understand it. The Risk Bow Tie, a classic risk management exercise we've adapted, helps teams analyze what conditions created a risk and brainstorm controls that could make the risk less likely to materialize or lessen the impact if it happens.

Consider scenario planning. Scenario planning can get complex, but it doesn't have to. We like the Georgia Center for Nonprofits' [simplified scenario planning playbook](#). Or go even more basic: choose a risk that would have a big impact on your nonprofit, envision the most positive and negative extreme scenarios you can, as well as one in the middle, and consider one or two actions you could take to prepare for each of those possibilities.

Ditch the risk register. At NRMC, we believe a long list of risks is...[just a long list of risks](#). In a chaotic environment, simplifying what you can helps. If your team members can't take action on risk because they're wrangling cells in a giant risk matrix spreadsheet, pare things back. Convene your leadership team to focus on three to five risks—possibilities—that would have a big impact on your nonprofit. [Make a brief action plan for](#)

[each](#). No spreadsheet required.

Recall previous wins. When you're in a crisis that's testing you, it can be easy to forget how amazing and resilient your team is, and how many challenges you've already met. Consider gathering your team to revisit a previous risk you mitigated in a way that felt right. What lessons from that experience can you apply to your current situation?

Talk to your peers. Attending an association meeting or a conference can remind you that you're not alone and surface creative ways peers are solving problems like yours. We think NRMC's [Risk Summit in Reston, Virginia this October 27-28](#) is a great place to do that. The Risk Summit will offer peer learning sessions, insight on the uncertainties nonprofits face this year, perspective on insurance challenges, and much more. If your budget won't allow that, check out one of the free trainings offered by groups like the Chronicle of Philanthropy.

If all else fails, change the scenery. Once, when I was managing a newsroom, I faced a situation so challenging even more-experienced mentors weren't sure how to advise me. I had registered to attend a business luncheon that day and didn't want to cancel, so I went. For an hour, my mind let go of the problem while I networked and listened to an interesting speaker. As I sat there, I thought of an expert who might have insight into my problem. I called the expert the second I got back to my office, and they helped me find a path through a thorny situation. To this day I believe I reached a solution solely because circumstances interrupted my looping (and unproductive) thought pattern.

The impulse to focus only on the day-to-day in moments of crisis is understandable—but your team can and should do something to prepare for risks (possibilities) that could have a big impact on your mission. We encourage you to take one simple step today to address a daunting risk you face. Taking action, even in a small way, will make you better prepared for impact—no matter how a risk plays out.

Rachel Sams is Lead Consultant and Editor at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She and this article are inspired by recent interactions with NRMC's resilient and curious consulting clients. Reach her with thoughts and questions about this article at rachel@nonprofitrisk.org or (505) 456-4045.