When a Crisis Hits, Be Prepared



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Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: Crisis Management, Crisis Communications

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Imagine a water main break flooded your nonprofit's building tomorrow.

Now imagine that tomorrow also happened to be the day of your organization's most important fundraiser of the year—one that brings hundreds of clients and supporters to your premises.

What would you do?

Maybe the thought rattles your nerves, but you already know what three people you'd call. You're confident your organization would get through it.

Now imagine a front-line staffer or volunteer was the first to arrive at the building and discover the issue.

Would they know what to do?

If the answer to either of the above questions is no, it's time for your nonprofit to create or refine a crisis plan.

In NRMC's experience, many nonprofits don't have a crisis plan. Some may not feel they need one. In the challenging times we're living through, leaders may think, "We've met everything the universe has thrown at us so far. Why take time to plan for something that hasn't happened yet? We'll deal with it if it happens."

Other nonprofits may have a crisis plan that's sat untouched on a server for years.

This era has been so turbulent, from nonprofit funding cuts and executive orders to war and natural disaster, that many experts are calling it an era of polycrisis.

A crisis plan can provide some guidance when things feel overwhelming. The good news: The process doesn't have to be complicated or involve a series of 10 meetings. A simple plan communicated to all staff will give your team some immediate peace of mind and equip you to work more effectively in a crisis. If you can go a little further, like creating basic statements you could update and share with constituents and the public in a crisis, you'll be even better prepared.

Here's a simple approach to drafting a crisis plan.

Get Down to Basics

You may be tempted to draft multiple crisis plans for every type of scenario that might occur. Resist that impulse! A simple plan will serve as a foundation you can adapt for any type of crisis you face.

Determine some of the major calls that would need to be made, like:

- Is this a crisis? Are we now in crisis management mode?
- If our building or service delivery platform is impacted, what do we need to do to secure it and/or find other formats/locations for programs and services?
- What other parties do we need to notify and how quickly? (law enforcement, insurance, legal counsel, media)
- What new things must we do, and what will we stop or pause doing, until the crisis abates?

Once you've outlined those calls, determine who can make them.

- Who has authority to activate the crisis plan?
- Who notifies that decision-maker? On what platform(s)?
- How will messages about the crisis be disseminated to other constituents?
- Who will be the organization's spokesperson?
- Who else can we already anticipate will likely play key roles (communications staff, IT, etc.)? Designate them part of your core crisis team, with the ability to add other staffers as needed.

Bonus: If you have the time and capacity, create or update "holding statements" your nonprofit can adapt to particular crises ("We are committed to the safety of our community and are taking these steps…")

That's really all you need to get started. If you have those things in place already, test them! Take a couple of hours for your leadership team and key players to practice what you'd do in a specific crisis scenario. Note lessons learned and adapt your crisis plan accordingly.

If you take these simple steps and communicate them clearly to staff, volunteers and constituents, the next time a staff member or volunteer encounters a crisis, they'll be more likely to take a deep breath, remember the plan, and make a good call—and so will everyone else.

Rachel Sams is a Lead Consultant and Editor at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Once, decades ago, she spent an entire morning trying to find a way around floodwaters to reach her workplace. When she gave up and returned home, she found a note on the door from her boss, who didn't have her cell phone number and dropped by to tell her about the disruption. Reach her with thoughts and questions about crisis planning at rachel@nonprofitrisk.org or (505) 456-4045.