

# LEADING THROUGH CRISIS:

## A Framework for Nonprofits During Trying Times

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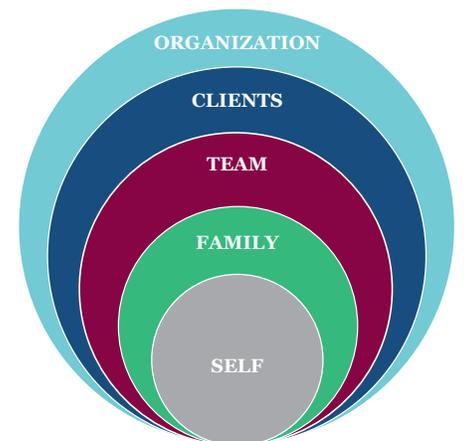
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As we now extend our new reality, life with COVID-19 and beyond, there is much that we still don't know or understand. What is clear is that we are in a time unlike any other. Consider this our attempt to bring some order to the chaos—not necessarily to answer all of your questions, but to give nonprofit leaders a framework to ensure you are asking the right kind of questions. We also hope to provide funders and supporters a view of the types of challenges nonprofits are facing. This moment calls on all of us to pose difficult questions, to recognize that decisions we are making will have an impact on our organizations for years to come, and to understand how we live our organization's values in an ever-changing landscape defined by crisis and uncertainty. In that spirit, these insights and recommendations are based on the challenges we are hearing as we work alongside you and your peers.

### 1 Prioritize caring for yourself, your family, and your team.

Offices have gone virtual, operations are disrupted, and organizational and community challenges are present that no one could have predicted. Take a deep breath, pay attention, and admit that nothing is "business-as-usual." Don't put unrealistic expectations on yourself, your family, your team, or those you serve. When you prioritize feelings and support, you improve your chances of bringing your organization through this. Centering your priorities will allow you to be your best self for your organization.

Because leadership is connected to emotional intelligence, paying attention also means elevating empathy, compassion, and effective communication. It's critical to keep your head up and pay close attention to yourself and those around you. Remember, your team and their families are experiencing all the same things you are, at the same time. With your head down you may miss what people are going through, how they are feeling, and the multiple layers of stress everyone is carrying. As leaders, we are tempted to make things seem normal, but doing so now is likely to only further dampen the morale of our families, teams, partners, and donors.



Make sure your families and team know you CARE.

So, now  
what?

- C (calm):** Are you remaining calm and balanced and encouraging your family and team to do the same?
- A (acknowledge):** Are you acknowledging and validating feelings of discomfort and uncertainty?
- R (recognize):** Are you consistently celebrating family and team members for going above and beyond? For their own self-care? For being innovative?
- E (engage):** Are you creatively engaging your family and team in order to retain meaningful connections and comradery while practicing appropriate social distancing?

## 2 Reaffirm your mission with everyone—internally and externally.

Remember why you are here. If you are in the trenches, your mission is likely more critical than ever. If you aren't, you still have a duty to consider, "What is our mission and how does it fit into this crisis?"

Now is the time to hold true to your mission, vision, and values. The danger during a crisis is that you can easily drift from your organization's mission, enter survival mode, and start chasing money by doing anything someone is willing to pay you to do. We understand the financial stress present in the sector, but the first thing we should be asking in this moment is not "How do we survive?" Instead, we should ask, "How do we keep making a difference with the people we are called to serve?" This is, in fact, living our mission!



So, now  
what?

If your organization doesn't have an updated strategic plan, now is not the time to start that process. If you do have a plan, use it to answer this critical question: *"Is it time for us to..."*

**STEP UP?** Yes, if your mission includes immediately serving the most vulnerable in our communities.

**STEP IN?** Yes, if you have the capacity to help your peers and share resources, financial and otherwise.

**STEP BACK?** Yes, if your organizational needs are less pressing in relation to the urgency of the hour.

## 3 Communicate. Communicate. Communicate.

In the absence of clear, consistent communication, people will speculate, create their own narrative, and become more afraid. Reserve time every day to communicate with your organization and stakeholders. Protect that time. To paraphrase Dr. Anthony Fauci, "If you think you are doing too much (communication), then you are probably doing the right amount."

To be clear, effective crisis communication is not a one-way street. It's not about pushing out messages or endless fundraising emails. True communication requires us to ask questions and listen to our staff, clients, stakeholders, and community. It also requires us to be self-aware so that we can identify the right person(s) to deliver the right messages at the right times. Even when the whole story is not known, be transparent. Give the information you have when you have it and be honest about the things you don't know.



So, now  
what?

*How often are you communicating internally—with your management team, staff, and board?*

*Have you provided others in your organization the proper training to share the communication burden?*

*Are you being clear and timely in your external communication or are you just adding to the noise? Are you the right messenger?*

## 4 Recalibrate relationships with your board.

Board members are more distracted than ever, with their own businesses and families to care for—just when you need them the most! This moment requires you to change expectations of board engagement. At the same time, it calls for you to be vulnerable and admit you can't do everything. You need help, and it's OK to say this out loud.

Truthfully, the leadership needed in this moment isn't likely to come from boards. Waiting on board members to call a meeting or bring you ideas is not a rational approach. This isn't a criticism, nor the promotion of a power struggle. It's

just reality. Having limited access to your board right now provides an opportunity to remind them why they hired you. This is the moment for you to lead, and your primary tasks as a leader are to make sense in the midst of chaos and provide direction. Board members will step in and contribute when expectations are reasonable, thoughtful, and clearly communicated. They want to help, but you need to tell them how and when.

**So, now  
what?**

*Have you communicated clearly to your board what you need at this time? How often will you meet? How will you stay in touch?*

*Are you able to forecast and predict the needs of your organization and those you serve? Are you, as a result, able to take solutions (rather than problems) to the board?*

## 5 Face reality. Be transparent about short-term revenue implications and long-term sustainability.

While there are many models for decision making in crisis, decision-making fatigue can bring you down. Be vulnerable. Engage others to help triage your work and resources. Look first to your immediate team, but don't rule out the contributions of others. Leverage relationships with finance committee members and open up lines of communication with donors.

Most importantly, have a plan. Who is most important to involve and engage? How will you determine what is most important when seemingly everything is? Remember, this is no longer business as usual, and the situation is fast moving. If we wait too long to make tough decisions, our organizations may never recover. Reality tells us critical decisions will need to be made in real-time for the foreseeable future. As a leader, you can either lean into this realization or continue in denial.

What about fundraising? Some think there is too much philanthropic "noise" to raise money right now. Others think now is the precise time to ask. We believe both approaches are correct, depending on your mission (see #2). And, no matter, decisions made today will have a lasting impact.

Swift action still must be informed and thoughtful. Make programmatic and financial moves with long-term viability and sustainability at the forefront. Focusing solely on short-term, emergency fundraising and budgeting is complicated because we still don't know how short "short-term" is on this hazy horizon. Remember to balance short-term and long-term decisions with information, time, careful thought, and collective action.

**So, now  
what?**

*Does your organization serve vulnerable populations most affected by this pandemic? Are you clear on how you will use additional support to enhance your services?*

*Are the needs of the populations you serve less urgent? This could be a step-back moment. You may choose to save resources now and focus your decision making on long-term sustainability.*

*What can you do to protect your assets? If you choose to suspend programming, how will you determine when to reinstate it?*

COVID-19 has thrown nonprofit leaders and those who support them into an unknown land without a map or script to follow. Know we are in this place together, doing the best we can. While there is more than one path forward, we only find the best answers by asking difficult questions, like the ones we have posed here. Each of us must commit to applying what we know now and striving to find more answers over time.

Our group is committed to asking more questions, but also searching alongside you for answers. As we come up with some, we'll share, and we hope you'll do the same.

To view this article online, which was published on March 31, 2020, visit [www.together.org/blog](http://www.together.org/blog).

