

# What Nonprofit Board Members Should Be Doing Right Now to Address the COVID-19 Situation.

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As the world responds to the threats of COVID-19, many nonprofits and their boards are wrestling with difficult questions and decisions. In these uncertain times, as the situation rapidly changes, the board needs to provide steady and adaptive leadership in partnership with and in support of the CEO.

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# The Board's Role in a Crisis

The board should be working closely with the chief executive to govern and manage the situation, as well as address external threats. While the CEO is responsible for operational planning and executing these plans, the board should be reviewing and responding to the organization's strategy, and providing feedback. Both the board and CEO should be flexible in their planning, and consider all the possible ways the COVID-19 crisis can evolve. As the board reviews the organization's plans, it should consider:

What aspects of this situation could affect our organization?

What are the organization's greatest vulnerabilities?

What questions from the press would we least like to face?

How can we prevent worse-case scenarios from occurring?

## COVID-19 Response and Communications Planning

A collaborative and adaptive approach to crisis planning and management will ensure that both staff and board perspectives are heard. A variety of perspectives should be considered in developing a plan, including but not limited to, a human resources specialist, a financial officer, and a legal authority for the organization. A plan should also clearly define the roles for the board and staff to avoid confusion.

### Risk Assessment and Management

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Managing risk begins with determining who will coordinate the effort. As stewards of the organization, the board must be sensitive to the existence of risk, set the tone for dealing with it, and demand that proper processes and tools are in place to keep the organization safe and ready to act when a situation demands it. Ted Bilich from Risk Alternatives goes into [how to reduce risk related to COVID-19](#).

As part of any risk management strategy, the board and CEO should be assessing how the current economic climate, the lifecycle stage of the organization, and the community they serve will influence the organization's response plan. Additionally, as stewards of the organization who are responsible for the financial and legal oversight of the organization, the board should assess the current and future impact that COVID-19 will have on the economy, the organization, staff members, and the community it serves. A key piece of risk management is understanding what current insurance policies and risk mitigation practices you have in place and understand what is and what is not covered.

As organizations try to plan for the days, weeks, and months ahead, the board, in partnership with the CEO, should be continuously monitoring the situation and assessing any potential risks that might arise as the COVID-19 issue evolves. These are challenging times, and it is important for the board and staff to come together and develop a plan that will help the organization weather this crisis. A thorough crisis response plan might include

- a media strategy, including a press kit with facts about the organization

- logistics for convening an emergency board meeting

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## **Organizational Events**

The CEO should be monitoring state and local developments regarding the virus, and determining if the organization should continue with planned in-person events, or explore virtual event options. While in many cases, it is ultimately a decision of the staff to cancel programs, the board needs to be engaged depending on the size/magnitude of the event and its impact financially on the budget and organization as whole. The Professional Convention Management Association has [more information on event contingency planning](#).

## **Finances and Investments**

Boards must also discuss potential changes to the organization's finances or investments. COVID-19's impact on the economy remains uncertain, and the board and CEO must think about the organization's ability to secure future grants or donations, what services may need to adapt to current directives for social distancing, and how cancelled programs will influence the budget. This conversation should consider the short-term and long-term viability of the organization's assets and whether the organization should [build or dip into their reserves](#).

## **Staff and Stakeholder Safety**

Every organization should have a plan in place if someone in your organization is diagnosed with COVID-19. What are next steps? How will you notify employees and others that operate within your environment? If you have not done so

yet, Review [this piece from the US Chamber Foundation](#) as a good start.

As the CEO and executive staff explore how to best protect staff and stakeholders, the board should be updated on any decisions or policies the chief executive makes such as teleworking or cancelling events or services. As leaders, it is the role of the CEO and board to make sure that staff, stakeholders, and volunteers know how to protect themselves and the community. If the organization decides to move to [a remote worker policy](#), are there systems and technology in place that support those efforts?

An organization should also refer to their Business Continuity Plan (BCP). BCPs are an essential part of an overall risk management strategy and are helpful in allowing the organization to remain operating during a crisis. A BCP covers all aspects of operations and involves input from most personnel, depending on the size of the organization. This type of planning also helps ensure staff safety and should address how critical functions will be managed if staff are required to telework. You can [read more about BCPs here](#) from Nonprofit Risk Management Center.

### **Board Meetings and Decision-Making Practices**

With travel restrictions and recommendations for social distancing, boards need to discuss how they will meet and conduct board business. First, boards should check their bylaws and state's [sunshine laws](#) to determine whether [virtual board meetings](#) and or voting is an option. In times of crisis, the leadership that board brings to an organization is even more important, and your board needs to be able to meet virtually to ask tough questions and have important discussions about the needs of the organization and the community it serves.

The board should also be engaging in scenario planning and anticipating any conversations they may need to have pertaining to the current and anticipated situation, and how the board will vote and record any decisions it makes if traditional meeting practices have been altered.

### **Communications Planning**

Not only should the board be thinking about the effects of COVID-19 and planning for potential risks, it needs to consider what and how the organization will communicate with staff, leaders, and the communities it serves. A good starting point in crisis communication planning is a broad discussion between the board and CEO, centered on the following questions:

What information should we as an organization share with the public?

Who will be the main point of communication? Does the organization have a communication tree in place?

Does the organization have plans for a crisis taskforce?

Who is responsible for managing the crisis, and what are their duties?

### **Continual Assessment**

Crisis response and communication planning is never done. Once a communication plan has been established, it is the board's role to continue to support the CEO and organization. This means maintaining communication that is consistent with the organization's response and backing up the CEO on all decision making. As the situation changes, the board, in partnership with the CEO, will want to continue analyzing any risk and update their communication plans accordingly.

These are trying times when board leadership is tested. We know how hard it is, as we are experiencing this crisis along with you, your staffs, and the people and communities you serve. You are all in our thoughts as we work to provide resources to help you through this challenging time. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out to our [Ask the Expert service](#).

## Additional resources that we have found helpful:

[Candid's information and news on COVID-19](#)

[Information from Independent Sector on COVID-19](#)

[Metrics on current COVID-19 cases](#)

[CDC guidelines](#)

[World Health Organization updates](#)

[Compilation of risk management resources](#)

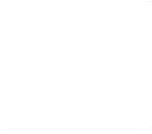
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