



If Catastrophe
Strikes Tomorrow,
Will Your Nonprofit
Survive?

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We've all heard some variation on the saying, "It's not how we make mistakes, but how we correct them that defines us." And while this is true to a degree, the ability to swiftly and successfully recover from a mistake, accident or other catastrophic event relies on something else: A plan.

If you're running a nonprofit, meanwhile, crisis and response planning becomes even more vital. Why? Because the margin of error for nonprofits is much smaller than for their resource-rich, for-profit counterparts. In other words, not only do you have as much to lose, but you can lose it much more easily.

Wondering where to begin when it comes to shoring up your nonprofit for a potential emergency? Here's what all nonprofit managers need to know about crisis and response planning.

Things Go Wrong

Murphy's Law tells us that "Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong." While this may be somewhat hyperbolic, the fact is that plenty can go wrong for nonprofits. According to the Alliance for Nonprofit Management, "No matter how improbable a risk may seem, if you can envision it happening in your organization, you should list it during this stage of the risk management process." From building problems to volunteer shortages to cash shortfalls, the everyday reality of the average nonprofit organization is a tenuous one.

Not only that, but the longer you wait to address looming concerns, the higher the chance of a

crisis occurring. Conversely, in acknowledging potential obstacles, you increase the odds that you'll be able to surmount them. This is called risk management, and it's an essential part of ensuring your organization's future.

Unfortunately, risk management isn't foolproof, and no amount of proactive planning can completely prevent crisis from befalling your nonprofit. However, you can still alter the outcome. Enter crisis response planning.

Be Ready with a Response

Crisis response planning is a natural extension of risk management. After all, we've already established that things can and do go wrong. Which begs the question: What next?

In “Your Crisis Response Plan: The Ten Effective Elements,” Harvard Business School professor Michael Watkins proposes the following 10 components as essential to any crisis response plan:

- 01 A broad range of crisis scenarios, including everything from infrastructure failure to shooter on site.
- 02 A number of pre-set, flexible response “modules” aimed at responding to unexpected scenarios.
- 03 A core plan directly linking crisis scenarios with response modules.
- 04 An established and centralized chain of command, including a designated leader and team.
- 05 Clear and preset signals for activating and deactivating specific response modules.
- 06 A designated command post for the crisis response team, as well as a backup location.
- 07 Easily activated communication channels for reaching your team members — both on- and off-site.
- 08 Backup resources across everything from power to medical supplies to food and water reserves.
- 09 Routine simulations conducted by the crisis response team.
- 10 A disciplined post-crisis review with organizational learning and plan revision in mind.



Also, keep in mind that no crisis response plan is static. The Nonprofit Risk Management Center advises: “Risk management is a process not a task, therefore it is important to constantly review what you are doing, celebrate your triumphs, and analyze the reasons behind any setbacks.”

The Critical Role of Communication

Communication is so crucial to overcoming a crisis that it deserves a category of its own. Says the Nonprofit Risk Management Center, “A crisis communications plan aids quick response, clear thinking and inclusiveness under fire. It works hand-in-hand with a disaster plan to mitigate (or reduce) the damages, focusing on presenting the situation in the best possible light.”

Its ultimate goal? To gather all must-know information in one central place so it's at the ready when an event occurs. After all, not everyone responds the same way during a crisis. A crisis communication plan ensures that every one of your constituents will have access to the information they need to respond to the crisis at hand in the way that optimally benefits your organization.

According to the Nonprofit Risk Management Center, “The simpler the risk management strategy is, the more likely it is that it will be applied... at the outset it is more important that your program be comprehensible rather than comprehensive.” The same applies to your communication plan. Your message must be calm, concise and clear. Also, keep in mind that failure to respond can be just as damaging as responding in a less than optimal way. When the goal is to move forward, owning the crisis with a swift, accurate and authoritative response can shorten the “news cycle” and help you move on.

21st Century Communications

Any thorough 21st century crisis communication plan also acknowledges that how the message is delivered is just as important as the message itself. PR specialist Ann Marie van den Hurk says, “During a crisis, you can expect that some systems will be compromised. This is why you need to be able to make plans to work with multiple channels

of communications to get out information quickly and efficiently. That means expanding beyond the traditional means of sharing information... You should have more than one channel to reach people within and outside the organization — such as a website, phone trees, email or SMS text messaging groups.”

But even if all of your communication systems remain intact, the nature of today’s digital society mandates the use of multiple channels — including phone, email, SMS text messaging and social media — if your goal is to get the right information to the right people at the right time in the right way. This is what makes today’s advanced automated messaging services like OnSolve One Call Now a must-have for today’s forward-thinking, fast-acting nonprofits. In addition to letting your constituents choose how they receive your communications, customizable services like One Call Now also offer other smart features, including everything from multilingual translation to hot transfer.



When disaster strikes, you won't have time to create and implement a response plan. However, by making crisis response planning an immediate organizational priority, you can position your nonprofit to keep ahead of whatever storm — either literal or figurative — is coming your way.

OnSolve One Call Now provides voice, text and email notification services to Nonprofit organizations nationwide.



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