

Coronavirus (COVID-19): 7 Things Your Board Can Do to Lead in Times of Crisis

If there was ever a call to action for board members, this is it. Your staff needs you. Your beneficiaries need you. Your community needs you. Whether you're a new board member or on your third term, it's time to lead and act.

And I'm not just talking about sitting at a table and voting, I'm talking about rolling up your sleeves, eagerly speaking up and saying, "What can we do to help?" and "What can I do to help?" This is the time for your board to set aside busy schedules and egos and become the most active, selfless, and engaged it's ever been, transforming itself into a "do something," "get it done," "you can count on me" board.

Here's a checklist of seven things your board can do to demonstrate its leadership and commitment during these unsettling times:

1. **Include your staff.** No one knows your programming and the intricacies of your organization better than your staff. When you hold your "crisis" meetings, include the executive director and key staff, and encourage them to share and discuss their needs and those of the organization. The last thing your anxious staff needs to feel right now is that the board is making unilateral decisions without their input. Staff want to know you're supporting them, not controlling them. Think inclusion and empowerment, not exclusion.
2. **Pay your staff.** The nerves of staff are fragile. Many are very scared. Many young staff live paycheck to paycheck, have insufficient savings, and have little experience with traumatic events. Older staff worry about their children, spouse layoffs, mortgage payments, and their shriveling 401k's. Everyone seems worried about the health of their parents and grandparents.

For your staff to adequately care for the needs of your beneficiaries, they need to feel secure—financially secure. This is the time to be generous at all costs. Give paid time off. Pay for childcare. Extend the number of paid sick days. Help pay bills and mortgages. Talk with your major funders, the bank, or the board itself to raise emergency funds or provide zero-interest loans. These funds can also help pay business expenses, program expenses, and utility bills. It's the board's responsibility to ensure the financial sustainability of the organization. This is no longer a limp line in your Roles and Responsibilities document, it's reality. Remove the burden from your staff. Rally together and find the money . . . it's your job.

3. **Ensure workplace safety.** Right alongside financial needs are safety needs. If you're an advocacy organization, it may be easy for staff to work from home. However, if you're a foodbank, your staff is probably overwhelmed with demand right now and feel obligated to work. Create a task force to find and buy whatever is necessary to protect your staff and sanitize their workplace. This is all pretty obvious by now and there are hundreds of websites outlining how to sterilize a workplace environment. Your job? . . . help make it happen.

4. **Provide crises and trauma counseling services.** In times of crises and trauma, people often lose their sense of place and direction. You can assume many staff and volunteers are feeling quite scared and anxious, even if they won't openly admit it. Some are traumatized by watching the news, experiencing sleepless nights, concerned about grocery scarcity, fearful of catching the virus, or worried that a loved one might die. Allocate funds to pay for crisis and trauma counseling for staff and family members. We're talking about people's psychological health here, and it's just as important as investing your staff's physical health. Find some top-notch clinicians in your area and let staff know they and their families can access these services.

This is also an important time to make your staff feel valued and appreciated. Have board members do some little, unexpected things for staff: Make phone calls expressing appreciation, hand out gift certificates for take-out meals, or write handwritten appreciation cards. Brainstorm other ideas that would warm the hearts of staff and make them smile . . . something we all need more of right now.

5. **Postpone events and inform donors.** If you were planning to have your annual gala this spring, or any fundraising event, postpone it. Even if the virus curve flattens, people may still be leery of crowded venues. Push your event to late summer or fall. The worst thing you can do right now is cancel your event and then try to scramble to hold it online. From my experience, these quick-fix solutions often look cheesy and the responses are typically small.

Remember, many people are worried about their finances. Some have lost 10 to 20 percent of the wealth they had in stocks. Instead of putting together a haphazard online event, make specific appeals to specific donor segments for specific needs you have. I've had huge success creating sponsorship lists and wish lists of items I needed funded. Work with your executive director to contact donors and keep them informed. For detailed information on fundraising and donor relations, read this article I recently wrote: [COVID-19 Fundraising and Donor Relations Tactics](#).

6. **Regularly inform the community.** People who support your mission want to know what's happening at the organization during these trying times. Create talking points and FAQ's for board members to share in the community and on social media. Work with staff to write *super short* and regular updates about what's happening with staff, programs, beneficiaries, operations, and events. I'd suggest a *daily* brief no longer than one or two paragraphs. Include local media on your recipient list because they might want to write an article based on what you sent them. Your board chair and executive director should be the points of contact with the media.
7. **Meet regularly.** We're all chasing a moving target. News about the virus and its impact on families and businesses changes daily. Therefore, have regular conference calls until things settle down (daily if you must). Avoid getting bogged down in details. Discuss topics of concern, create a prioritized ToDo list, assign work, do the work, share the status of the work, and then start the process over. What's most important right now is for the board to lead and act, and do it all in a collegial fashion with your staff. The virus has affected everyone. Once it passes, we might just find a few strands of silver lining in all this as boards and staff learn to work *together* to overcome unexpected challenges as they work passionately to propel their missions.

Looking for answers to your worries and concerns?

I'm here to help. Contact me . . .

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