



What Should You Focus on During Challenging Times?

What are the most important steps?

By Emily Davis

As the economy continues to be a challenge, what strategies should your organization be focusing on? To be fair, many nonprofit organizations are pretty much always working in “crisis mode.” They’re always worried about funding and thinking about competition. Few nonprofit organizations feel they’re “good to go” and in a place that’s sustainable.

The current economy provides an especially good learning opportunity. We know that at some point in our organizations’ life cycles there’s going to be another economic downturn. It may look different, but it’s going to happen so let’s learn from the experience now. Here’s how to get started.

Evaluate

Do a thorough evaluation of your organization. Where are there gaps in what can make your organization healthy? In marketing? Board development? Volunteer development? Other items? Typically, programs are the pieces we have a lot of passion for, and the less-sexy business side of things may not get the proper attention. Set aside time to look at the priorities that need to be addressed.

Help People Learn & Grow

Invest in professional development for your board and staff (including volunteers). There are many good resources you can use. Start with your local nonprofit association and go from there.

When times are tight, human development is often the first thing cut.

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But education has a way of more than paying for itself. As just one example, paying for training related to fundraising will create more ambassadors gaining support for your organization and bringing in more money. Make sure your organization has a membership to the Association of Fundraising Professionals where you can access education about different fundraising strategies. If you don’t have professional development funding in your budget, put it there now!

Create Plans

What kinds of plans? Start with your board. What are your plans for board recruitment, retention, and evaluation? Create board descriptions, applications, orientation, and assessment tools.

The reason to start with your board is that your board members are the head of your leadership team, along with the executive director. The board is fiscally responsible for your organization, so you want to start with them and set them up for success.

Be sure you have a fundraising plan that includes your board. Consider hiring a fundraising consultant or even a graduate student to help you write your fundraising plan. Such a plan will allow you to evaluate your success and tweak your activities based on that evaluation.

Other plans you may want to consider include volunteer recruitment plans and social media plans. And don’t forget to update your strategic

plan on a regular basis. Consider organizing a board-staff retreat and hiring a facilitator to help with the strategic planning process.

And, of course, reading the plans you’ve created, and putting them into action, is a big help, too!

Wrapping It Up

The punch line is that you want to take advantage of some of the slower times and focus your resources for the long term, not just the short term. It’s organizations with long term vision that will survive tough times.

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Making It Work

Put these steps into action with these articles at www.snpo.org/ members:

- **Four Steps to Evaluation Success** (Vol. 23, No. 2)
- **Strategic Planning on a Budget** (Vol. 23, No. 4)
- **Training Programs Need More than Good Information** (Vol. 21, No. 2)
- **Five Golden Rules for Board-Exec Retreats** (Vol. 26, No. 1)
- **How to Assess and Improve Your Board’s Performance** (Vol. 24, No. 1)

Also see Society for Nonprofit Organizations’ webinars and Learning Institute programs online (www.snpo.org/lino).