



# Dealing with Viruses & Other Disruptions

The coronavirus will have some long-lasting impacts. But you can turn those effects from potential problems to powerful opportunities.

**By Jill Muehrcke**

It feels as if the whole world has changed. And it's true; it has. In the wake of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), everything has been disrupted, and our world will never be the same.

For many, this may be a helpful wake-up call. People are listening more closely now to the message at the heart of nonprofit values – that we are better in community than alone, that we can accomplish more together than apart, and that banding together is the best way to solve problems.

As nonprofits, we're in an excellent, strategic place to share our visions with more people than ever before. We're well

positioned to lead in this new world in which the healing values of community, empathy, and sharing supercede the destructive culture of divisiveness, anger, and us vs. them.

Here are a few things that can help you not only survive today's challenges but emerge even stronger than before:

**Take full advantage of this time to strengthen relationships** with your board, staff, clients, and other stakeholders. Communicate clearly, truthfully, and often. Remember that communication isn't a one-way street. Whenever you contact people, seek as well as offer input. Ask how you can help. Find out how they think you're handling things. Take time to truly listen. Address their concerns, share ideas with them, and look together for creative ways to meet the challenges you're facing.

Help your people find advice from legitimate experts. People are hungry for information they can trust. Share stress-reduction and mindfulness strategies, and remind them of the invaluable counsel to let go of what we *can't* control and focus on the many things that *are* under our control.

“Take advantage of this time to generate lasting trust and goodwill.”

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“Not now. Maybe later.””

Designate someone as a point person to coordinate the messages you send out to your supporters, the public, and the media. Your organization’s “voice” should be one of competence and calm.

By seeking people’s feedback and offering them helpful resources and thoughtful conversations, you’ll generate trust and goodwill that will last far beyond this crisis.

**Make a new priority list each day.** In this fast-changing environment, a daily list will assure that you’re always focused on the things that are most important for your organization’s success. Which things are absolutely necessary to do today? What can wait till tomorrow? Who are the people who need your leadership most right now? Which items on your to-do list will have the greatest impact? Manage your time well by doing the hardest and highest-priority things when your energy is greatest (for most people, that’s first thing in the morning).

**Embrace technology** to keep people in virtual touch so they can support each other’s mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Use digital platforms for board meetings and similar gatherings. This is a good time to sharpen your remote-meeting techniques with solutions such as Zoom and tips from such experts as those at [trainyourboard.com](http://trainyourboard.com).

It’s also a good time to formalize policies and protocols for your employees to work from home, provide them with project-management tools such as Asana and Basecamp, and help them obtain the training and time-management skills they need to telework productively. Check in with your remote workers often to see how things are going and how you can be of help. Other epidemics and disruptions will occur, and what you and your team learn now will be helpful in the future.

Whenever possible, use video for your meetings and one-on-ones. Being able to look one another in the eye leads to better listening (body language matters) and prevents counterproductive multi-tasking, as Karin Hurt reminds us ([letsgrowleaders.com](http://letsgrowleaders.com)). Next best is the phone, because listening is much better than trying to interpret people’s tone and mood via texts, e-mail, or social-media. Tuning in to people’s emotions is an important part of meaningful connections.

**Don’t forget your donors and donor prospects.** In the wake of economic uncertainty, many donors are responding to fundraising asks with versions of “Not now. Maybe later,” as Gail Perry reports in a recent blog post ([gailperry.com](http://gailperry.com)).

As things slow down, use this time to get to know your donors, prospects, and other stakeholders better. Take deeper interest in them personally, Perry advises. Ask about their families, their experiences, their passionate interests. Give them more attention.

In the long run, a slowdown can work in your favor. Delaying your asks and focusing instead on nurturing the overall donor relationship will engage people. When your donors are more engaged, they’ll almost always give more, Perry tells us. Taking the long view will ultimately lead to deeper commitments and greater support for your organization.

Reimagine your events. Offer an alternative such as a stay-at-home event, online fundraiser, or virtual gathering. Virtual events can actually help you gain more support and make a greater profit than traditional, live events, because you can reach a much larger audience. (You can find help in moving events online with minimal hassle at sites such as [fundraisingeverywhere.com](http://fundraisingeverywhere.com).) If you cancel an event, consider giving people the option of a refund or a chance to donate their ticket price to your organization, perhaps with a little extra money to help your vulnerable clients and keep key programs strong.

Use this as an opportunity to “cite real numbers about your operating budget,” Perry suggests. Sharing these numbers strengthens your credibility. It also gives you a chance to talk about your organization’s impact. Tell people what you will do with their money. Be specific about a program or project that the money will help fund, Perry says. This type of specific information can open people’s hearts.

**Focus on what’s mission-critical, but don’t sacrifice long-term sustainability plans** for short-term fixes. Take steps and make plans that will be helpful not only now but also when the next interruption occurs, advises Melanie Herman ([nonprofitrisk.org](http://nonprofitrisk.org)).

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# UNPREPARED



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can work in your favor.”

Capture the many insights you've gained from this experience, and seek out the insights of others. Note which things have worked well, which failed, and how you'll adjust your plans the next time a disruption comes your way.

We can turn today's challenges into a useful learning opportunity. It's a great chance to take stock, improve what isn't working, solidify relationships, and create new and better plans for the future. None of us can go back to the way things were; rebirth is the only way forward.

**Take time to do research** and gain knowledge from sources you know you can trust. Recover from this crisis and be prepared for the next with articles such as these at NonprofitWorld.org:

**Will You Be Ready When Disaster Strikes? A Primer in Crisis Communications** (Vol. 18, No. 3)

**Counteract Stress to Make the Best Decisions** (Vol. 28, No. 1)

**Change Is All Around You: How Can You Tame It?** (Vol. 38, No. 1)

**Three Keys to Building Relationships in Life (and with Your Donors)** (Vol. 38, No. 1)

**Foreseeable Harm** (Vol. 20, No. 3)

**Risks Get Riskier for Nonprofits: ERM Can Help** (Vol. 38, No. 1)

**Don't Go It Alone in a Crisis** (Vol. 37, No. 2)

**Hurricanes, Strikes, Terrorism – Protect Your Events from Such Causes of Loss** (Vol. 28, No. 4)

**Planning for the Unforeseeable: How Smart Risk Management Provides Peace of Mind** (Vol. 24, No. 2)

**Six Steps to Good-Reputation Insurance** (Vol. 15, No. 1)

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**Crisis in the Boardroom – Can We Avoid Catastrophe?** (Vol. 21, No. 5)

**How Risky Is Your Special Event?** (Vol. 20, No. 1)

**Embrace Mindfulness as a Leadership Practice** (Vol. 36, No. 2)

**Seven Risk Questions for the Board** (Vol. 33, No. 4)



*Jill Muehrcke is the editor of Nonprofit World, which she founded in 1983. She is the author of numerous books, including Waking Up Happy: A Handbook of Change.*