

# Communicating in a Crisis

**The Ultimate Nonprofit Guide  
to Keeping Your Sh\*t Together When  
the Rest of the World Is Falling Apart**

You are living in extraordinary times where so much of typical life has stopped, yet so much goes on. You have an organization to run, market or raise funds for and it may feel almost impossible to do that. Here's a guide to help you.

This guide is not like typical crisis communications guides that assumes you can only survive a difficult time. This guide shows you that your organization can *thrive* during this crisis, and come out on the other side stronger than ever.



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# 1. Practice Self Care

In order to lead others through a crisis, you must first care for yourself. Creating and maintaining a confident and calm presence is critical to leading in a crisis. Your thoughts create your messages, and your energy speaks louder than words. Here's how to keep your mental space working for you.



## Adopt neutrality

Our society lives in polarities. Situations are good or bad, black or white, left or right. Our culture assumes we can be one thing or another but not both. Neutrality means situations don't need to be one thing or the other, they can just be. By adopting this mindset, you can create space for a full continuum of expression around this crisis for yourself, and be open to the feelings of others without judgement.

## Stay in the present

Stay in the NOW of the situation without wishing or hoping it will change soon. Practice gratitude and celebrate the good things that are happening each day. We know this crisis will pass, but we don't know when, so not marking the time until it ends will help you stay in the present.

## Plan for the future

You can stay in the present and plan for the future at the same time. As a society, we are constantly on the move, and now we are in a place where we can stop and have a collective global exhale. Reframe this time as one that can be productive for you and your organization. Take this time to make deliberate choices about the future you want to create.

## Limit news time

Pick a certain amount of time to spend updating yourself on the crisis and stop reading. Too much information can cause overload. Stay informed but not consumed.

## Lean on your support network

Leaning into family and friends is a critical part of taking care of yourself. You can give and receive empathy, energy and calming presence.

## Breathe

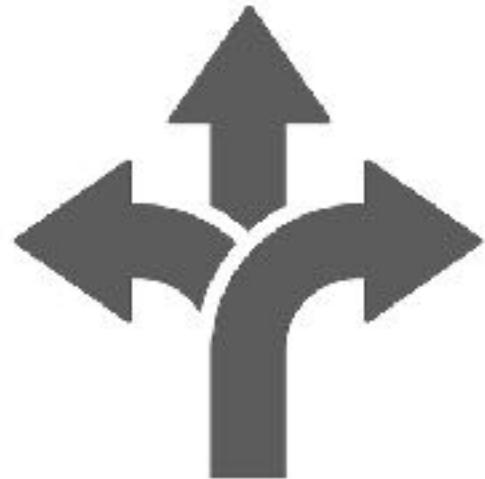
Remember to stop and breathe. Taking deep breaths can help alleviate tension and connect you to calm. If you are feeling anxious, here's a simple two-minute meditation to calm you that you can do anytime.

Close your eyes or lower your gaze. Take a breath in for four counts, hold it for four counts, then breathe out for four counts. Do this three times. Become conscious of your feet and feel the energy around them. Slowly move the energy up to your lower legs, upper legs, and torso. Bring attention to your stomach and relax it. Soften your shoulders, back, arms and hands, then relax your face. Take a deep breath using the four-count technique and notice your whole body present, then take one more breath and open your eyes or raise your gaze.

## 2. Reframe for Opportunity

Typical crisis communications has you react to a situation that seems out of control. This style of crisis communication allows you to reframe the crisis as an opportunity.

Everything we know as typical and normal is changing. If we go back to status quo, we've missed an opportunity...an opportunity to create the more just, equitable and connected world we are all working toward. We have an opportunity to shift our culture to one that values community and society over self.



### Connect to your power and purpose

In uncertain times, you want clarity and control, and it can be exhausting trying to create those. When you feel like things are unclear or out of control, you lose your connection to two things: **your power and your purpose.**

**What is your power?** Your gifts, your strengths, the assets you have like supportive donors and partners.

**What is your purpose?** What are you here to accomplish and what do you have to offer?

The good news is you always have your power and purpose, no matter the circumstance. Grounding yourself in your own personal power and purpose, and grounding your organization in its power and purpose can put you into positive action. When you connect with purpose and power, you can use them to help yourself and be of service to others.

### Set a positive outcome

You can do more than survive a crisis. You can create better outcomes. Ask this question:

**WHAT WOULD A WIN LOOK LIKE for you, for your organization and for your community?**

A win could look like raising funds without a big gala, keeping programs and staff, connecting more deeply with donors, realizing the effectiveness of virtual gatherings to connect stakeholders, or having your board step up into greater leadership. Defining the win means you are stating the power you have and the purpose you seek during and after the crisis.

### Create a 90-day plan

A 90-day plan will outline a clear course of action for the coming months. Include your big win as the goal. Instead of focusing on reacting to a situation, use the plan to create a proactive atmosphere that allows you to use your power and purpose to create a big win. When you focus on not surviving but thriving, you gain confidence in your organization's ability to navigate the future.

### 3. Learn from the past

In the 2008 Recession, nonprofits learned hard lessons on how to lead and communicate. Most nonprofits survived, and some even grew during that time. Here's what we learned that can help you navigate the COVID-19 era.



#### **Relationships matter, especially in crisis**

During the recession, when so many lost so much, nonprofits stopped fundraising as not to burden donors who were going through tough financial times. But donors felt neglected and hurt. They felt like because they didn't have as much money to donate, they didn't matter to the nonprofit. The best organizations kept donors involved, even if they couldn't make monetary donations. You want to be just as connected or even more with your donors and other supporters so they know you care about them all the time.

#### **Serving on a board is a real job**

Some boards were unprepared for the economic uncertainty and decisions that faced them. Nonprofit boards were often seen as a status position not as organizational leaders. Nonprofits that survived this either had or found board members willing to step up and do the real work of leadership. Finding and keeping engaged board members is key to managing a crisis. If your board is not engaged and supportive, this is your call to reconnect or recruit new members.

#### **If you stop fundraising, you will stop raising funds**

Many nonprofits stopped fundraising and cut development and marketing staff. The lack of donor development often took years to rebound from, much longer than the recession lasted. The lesson is if you stop asking for money, you will stop raising it. Nonprofits that adjusted their asks to meet the needs of donors but didn't abandon fundraising altogether recovered more quickly.

## 4. Adjust your strategies

Take a big picture view of your planned communications strategy in the context of the COVID-19 era. There were good reasons for you to communicate and those are still valid. Decide what is essential, what can be adjusted and what to postpone. Use the 90-day plan so you can pivot quickly if needed.



### Don't over or under sell

Transparency and authenticity is key to managing communications in a crisis. Don't exaggerate to capitalize on a situation and also don't try to undersell what is happening because you don't want to show weakness. Trust stakeholders to understand complex situations. Tell them the truth, even if you feel it is hard to explain or understand. It may help to talk through what you want to say first and then write it.

### Don't assume

Don't assume you know what donors or other stakeholders are thinking or feeling. "Why would anyone care about my cause right now?" During times of crisis, people realize what is really important to them. It will be a relief or an inspiration to them to know what is going on in your organization. Your communities need to believe life goes on after this crisis and you can be a part of that reassurance.

### Don't push

If your organization is one who is on the front lines of crisis response and you need funds, say so. If not, don't create urgency if there is none. A tool to keep up communication is an "open loop" message. There are four parts to the message that you can leave in a voicemail. It takes less than a minute, provides connection and leaves the follow up in their hands.

1. Say who you are
2. Offer a connection point and empathy
3. Give an update with brief example
4. Offer open availability & thanks

*"Hi, this is Nancy from Your Favorite Charity. It was great to see you at the fundraiser last month. Can you believe how much has changed since then? I hope you and your family are well during this time. I want to thank you for your past support and let you know that we are currently adjusting our programming to meet the needs of our community. For instance... (give a brief, specific example here). If you want to know more, please call me or send an email and I will be happy to share those details with you at any time. Thank you for being a part of our family and be well."*

### Don't ignore

Keep communicating. Don't ignore the situation or you will sound out of touch and don't swing the other way and focus only on the crisis. Use the crisis as context to share your message in an honest and authentic way. Marketing and fundraising is a long game, and even though right now it may feel like the crisis won't end, there will be another side. It takes months or years to build relationships, and a crisis that last a few months is not that much time. If you stop communicating, you will look unresponsive and may lose the relationship.

# 5. Use language to create your future

Your thoughts create the language that creates your reality. Language shapes your ability to manage this crisis from one of trying to survive to one of thriving in any circumstance.



## Use future based language

Fixed language assumes that the current way you think and feel about a situation will dictate the future. Future language assumes that you can create the future you want. Look at your messages and see if they are future-based. Stay away from words like, "yet." "We haven't had any problems, yet." Do you see how that sentence makes an assumption that there will be problems? This isn't about lying or being a Pollyanna, this is about being intentional about how you talk about a situation to set your organization up for the best outcomes possible... "We are working together to make things the best they can be."

## Use language to reassure

In a crisis, you feel out of control and that can creep into your language. Words like "stuck at home," or "lockdown" assume you are a victim of circumstance. Shift your language to show how there is power in any circumstance. Instead of "stuck at home," use "safe at home." Instead of talking about how eerie it is that buildings are empty, share how the emptiness means people are putting community before themselves. Instead of talking about how much you miss sports or restaurants, share how your community is creating new forms of entrainment or supporting industries. Model the future you want to see with your messaging.

Consider using "physical distance" instead of "social distance." This may be an uphill battle because "social distance" is so entrenched in our vernacular, but the phrase "physical distance" says we need to stay the six feet apart to stay safe but it says it without sacrificing a social connection. We are social beings, and we've never had more tools to stay connected than any time in history, so we can still be social.

## Speak with confidence

Speak your future with declarative words. "We hope to," "We are trying to," "We think we can," are phrases that don't feel confident. Words like trying, just, possibly, think, and maybe are used when you are not sure of the outcome, and you don't want to commit to something that might not happen. Your words shape your future, and when you speak and write declaratively, you create the future you declare. "We are," "We know," "We will," communicate your strength and determination.

## 6. Shift your mindset

How can you feel excited to help and serve when people are hurting and dying? How can you feel optimistic that you are creating a better world when so many are in pain?

You or others in leadership in your organization might be thinking, deep down, that you are not allowed to survive or even grow and thrive during this crisis, especially those of us in nonprofit world because our empathy meter is always set to "blast." How can you share stories, connect with donors, or ask for funds when so much is needed in other places?



### **Lead with compassion**

Use compassion as the standard for everything. Get connected with the needs of others and consider their feelings and experiences. Any decision, and the communication of that decision, needs to be spoken with empathy. Coming from a place of empathy will keep your messages in alignment and integrity, and resonate with audiences. One of the best things you can do is listen with an open heart and mind, without judging, trying to fix a situation, or giving advice. Practicing empathy allows your organization to strengthen relationships both internally and externally long after the crisis is over.

### **Stop comparative suffering**

The concept of "comparative suffering" means you can't feel bad or sad about your situation, or even feel good, when others feel bad. An example: You feel like you can't complain that you are working from home and schooling the kids when your friend lost her job. This assumes scarcity of empathy, as if empathy were a pie, and taking a slice meant others had less. The opposite is true...your ability to give yourself empathy is key to growing empathy for others. We don't have to rank or rate our pain. When we give ourselves compassion and grace, we build our empathy muscle and can give more to others.

### **Connect to abundance**

Nonprofits often adopt a scarcity mindset and that can be exacerbated in times of crisis. It is more important than ever to connect to abundance. There is enough time and money for all of us. You have everything you need to get through this. Make a conscious choice not to lead with fear and anxiety and instead connect to abundance. If you feel disconnected from abundance, take a look at your past and remember all the times when you thought it might not work out and it did. Adopt the mindset that you have made it through difficult situations in the past, and were even better for the experience.

### **Give yourself, and everyone else, grace**

Give grace to yourself and everyone around you. Practice forgiveness and self-compassion. Assume everyone, including you, is doing their best.

### **Focus on service**

In any crisis, seek to add value in your donors' and other stakeholders' lives, not contribute to the chaos. Communicate as a servant leader, with empathy and compassion. When you focus on being in service to others, you open up to the possibilities and the opportunities around you. Your nonprofit is allowed to thrive in any circumstance, because when you do, we all benefit.



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