

Governing In a Time of Crisis: 10 Action Items for Boards



- 1 Keep mission and values at the center**

Your mission and values should be guiding all of your decisions and how you stay in relationship with each other. It's especially important that equity and inclusion remain priorities; even when making quick decisions, ask who will be impacted and who needs to help inform them.
- 2 Prioritize the health and safety of the people**

This includes your staff, clients, volunteers, and fellow board members. Discuss how the organization is tending to not just your team's physical health, but emotional, mental, and spiritual health, as well.
- 3 Continue governing, but know that it will be different**

No matter the circumstance, boards still need to play a clear, governing role. However, be adaptive when it comes to structure, processes, and roles. Learn new ways to conduct board business such as virtual meetings and online voting. Activate existing or new ad hoc committees to take on different roles.
- 4 Engage the board chair as key partner**

The partnership between CEO and board chair is more important now than ever. Make sure as chair you're connecting regularly with the CEO and asking how you can be of help, while at the same time being a leader for the board. Provide a listening ear and serve as a thought partner to help the CEO weigh options and evaluate scenarios.
- 5 Support the CEO/Executive Director**

Pay attention and respond. If you get a high priority email, reply right away. Check in periodically. Stay curious and engaged, but know that the boundary between management and governance still exists. Ask "what do you need from the board?" Be mindful to listen and seek understanding first before jumping-in to provide quick solutions driven by your desire to help.
- 6 Communicate, communicate, communicate**

Over-communication in the time of crisis is essentially non-existent; things are evolving rapidly, so frequent, open communication is key in both directions. Use whatever communication channels necessary, whether email, Slack, online meetings, etc., to stay in touch with each other and leadership. Ask staff for key messages so you can remain ambassadors of

Our mission is to fuel the impact and effectiveness of nonprofits with guidance, expertise, and capital. Learn more about our services, training, and resources online.

● ● ● ● propelnonprofits.org



the organization while still being consistent with the overall communication strategy. Think about scheduling a standing check-in meeting. If the need for increased communication becomes a burden for an already stretched CEO, consider appointing a board member to coordinate board communication.

7 Flex and adapt with board roles and boundaries

Navigating through a crisis will call on a variety of skill sets, which is another reason having a diversity of perspectives and backgrounds on your board all the time is a good thing. For example, maybe you're revisiting bylaws, where a legal mind will be helpful, or you need to call upon HR or communication expertise. Or, insight maybe is needed to lend perspective on behalf of the community the organization works with.

If you don't have the necessary skill sets on your board, you may need to tap into your professional networks to fill gaps. At the same time, some board members may have limited availability, given their own capacity and circumstances. Again, practice open communication and be clear about when you need to play a governing role or where you can support as a volunteer given the current needs.

8 Activate a finance committee or group

As you're assessing your risks and possible next actions, think about activating a finance committee if you don't already have one, or a dedicated group to think through financial plans, scenarios, and short-and long-term considerations. Be mindful of your governance role and leave management decisions to staff. Engage in open communication with the CFO/Finance Director in a true partnership relationship.

9 Learn and adapt as you go

A crisis is a time for learning, grace, adaptability, and empathy. It's not a time to be perfect, but to iterate; you will need to take action based on the best information you have available. You will need to be simultaneously responding to short-, medium-, and long-term questions, and because things will keep changing and new information will emerge, you will likely make mistakes. The more you can keep a spirit of learning, the better. Priorities will need to change; be clear when that's the case.

10 Anticipate a changed future for the organization and the board

Wherever this crisis is leading us, the future will inevitably be different. Be intentional about how you're making decisions and as new possibilities emerge or systems start to develop, and take notes of what you're noticing. Use what you learn to inform generative conversations about how the organization will move forward. How can you use what you learn to help the board work better in the future? "Different" may very well lead to a better version of working together long-term.