



## Elevating Board Leadership Amid a Global Health Crisis

2020! What a year it was! As we are now fully into 2021, it is quickly becoming clear that many of the challenges of the past year will remain with us well into this year. While that is a difficult realization, it also presents opportunities – among them the chance to leverage these obstacles to continue to shape and evolve your volunteer leadership to ensure that it remains an engaged and contributing force for your organization.

As COVID-19 first made its way across the globe and communities faced shutdowns, significant job losses and historic and unforeseen impacts to daily personal and professional life, many leaders were forced to shutter their doors and/or shift to severe austerity measures to weather what was initially thought (or perhaps just hoped) to be a short-lived storm.

While in this reactive mindset, many leaders found themselves leaning on their Boards in unprecedented ways, convening their most trusted advisors to collectively navigate these uncharted waters. The circumstances demanded previously unparalleled levels of engagement and participation from Board members while simultaneously providing Boards with first-hand knowledge of their passionate, resourceful, hard-working staff members. This new dynamic was intimate and reinforced a sense of trust, transparency, and open communication. Within this reinvigorated relationship, staff were at their best managing the day-to-day with the Board providing thoughtful counsel, tapping into their personal networks, and offering other forms of support as circumstances demanded and allowed.

As we begin a new year and decade, it is imperative that the collaborative spirit between Boards and staff leadership only become stronger in the coming months. Elevated levels of Board engagement and leadership will be critical for the ongoing survival and success of our nonprofit colleagues.

We encourage our clients and colleagues to consider how they can utilize the current global health crisis to continue to leverage their volunteer leaders. Staff leadership needs to be strategic, taking time to evaluate and identify key strategies and initiatives. To help frame this effort, we encourage you to read *The Essence of Resilient Leadership: Business Recovery from COVID-19*, written by Deloitte Global CEO Punit Renjen for Deloitte Insights. In the article, Mr. Renjen discusses how successfully navigating the global health crisis requires resilient leadership. He defines resilience in the following way:

*Resilience is not a destination; it is a way of being. A "resilient organization" is not one that is simply able to return to where it left off before the crisis. Rather, the truly resilient organization is one that has transformed, having built the attitudes, beliefs, agility, and structures into its DNA that enable it to not just recover to where it was, but catapult forward – quickly.*

The article discusses what resilient leaders do across three major time frames: "Respond", "Recover", and "Thrive". When the pandemic and its shutdowns and initial impacts emerged, we were thrust into the "Respond" mode. Now, with some reflection, we can begin to think about shifting into the "Recover" mode while being prepared to "Thrive" when the health crisis is firmly in our collective rear-view mirrors.



In thinking about positioning your organization for success, particularly in a way that fully maximizes the strengths of your volunteer leaders, we encourage organizations to reflect on 2020 and make a plan for this year and beyond, so that they may deftly and nimbly navigate the remainder of the health crisis while simultaneously positioning themselves to “thrive” in what will be a “new” normal.

## Strategic Analysis

- This year has demanded that leaders re-evaluate all aspects of their operations, particularly volunteer leadership.
- Staff leaders called upon their Board members to help develop strategies to address the pandemic and its challenges. The pandemic put a spotlight on some Board members as exemplars, answering the call to support their organizations and ensure their survival and sustainability through the crisis. In other cases, the pandemic highlighted instances where Board members were disengaged, ill-informed or even a poor fit in their abilities and willingness to support their organizations.
- Where there were leadership gaps, changes that might have typically gone unnoticed, or that might have been slowly addressed were dealt with rapidly. Everything was on the table and new ways of thinking were enthusiastically welcomed. In that spirit, obstacles needed to be dispatched with rapidly – leaders could ill-afford any additional threats to the survival of their institutions. This may have even meant asking members to rotate off their Boards.
- We encourage leaders to continue this mode of thinking, reflecting on the past year and considering objectively what strengths and weaknesses the health crisis has brought to bear within your organization.
  - In what ways did your volunteer leaders rise to the occasion?
  - What do you need from them to maintain that level of support?
  - What gaps were illuminated that impact both short- and long-term sustainability?

## Make a Plan

- The requirements of resilient leadership include trust, anticipating what success looks like when the crisis has come to an end, and then defining a set of smaller, successive steps that slowly move an organization to that defined success. After reflecting on 2020 and using these criteria for resilient leadership, now is the time to develop a plan or detailed strategy for the coming year.
  - How can the deep trust that was strengthened or built with your Board while in “Respond” mode be maintained or further enhanced?
    - Defining this will deepen the high levels of engagement, participation and transparency needed from your Board to navigate the remainder of the crisis and shift effectively into “Recover” mode.



- What does success look like for your organization when the global health crisis finally comes to an end?
  - Taking the time to evaluate and define this now will help you navigate from the reactive “Respond” mode to the more forward-thinking “Recover” and “Thrive” modes. The global health crisis is sure to reshape your organization and even your entire industry. Be ready for that transformation and ensure that it is a positive one by considering how the crisis presented the opportunity to elevate your mission and daily operations.
  - This will also help to highlight what worked well in the execution of strategies while in the “Respond” mode in 2020 and as well as what could be strengthened or done differently this year.
  - This forward-looking mentality will also serve as a powerful, optimistic reminder that while the crisis has been extremely trying, it is ultimately temporary and with planning and careful execution, better days are ahead.
- To achieve that success, what are the “bite-sized” pieces that can be executed over time to get there?
  - There are pivots that can occur now to begin the transformation and prepare your organization for when the crisis ends. Identifying small steps will also allow staff and volunteer leadership to continue to focus on the “Recover” mode while also slowly shifting their mindset to the “Thrive” mode.

As we have come to know all too well, the situation will continue to evolve and there may be more challenges that we can’t anticipate today. While we can’t prepare for every possibility, we can have a plan for how we respond in a crisis and how we continue to activate and engage our volunteer leaders. Doing so will allow us to pivot when necessary while also being ideally positioned to emerge from this global health crisis with the strongest, most engaged leadership possible, ready to serve at the helm of a thriving organization.