Your next steps

How nonprofits can respond, recover and revitalize in the face of COVID-19

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After the initial rush to transition to remote work and keep organizations operational, the COVID-19 pandemic stretches on.

Some nonprofits have prepared extensively to reopen offices, while others are working to continually improve their virtual service delivery efforts and the remote-work capabilities of their employees.

As we move forward, there are three big areas you can focus on to make an impact on yourself, your organization, your colleagues and your clients. This e-book will cover:

- How to invest in yourself, as well as how to share what you learn and thus invest in others.

- How to understand how the pandemic has impacted the culture of your organization and what steps to take.

- How the shift to partially or fully remote workforce and virtual service delivery has increased the need for robust technology.

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Continue your professional development

The COVID-19 pandemic has not canceled professional development opportunities. Many typical in-person events have gone virtual, making it easier than ever to access and attend valuable learning sessions.

By investing in yourself and sharing what you learn, you invest in others. Here are five thoughtful learning options to consider going forward.

1. Attend a conference

Attending multiple conferences in a year can be a great way to re-energize yourself and reignite your innovative thinking. They help you connect with other nonprofit leaders and build valuable relationships. And they provide the opportunity to ask expert consultants questions that they would normally answer only if you hired them. These session presenters are leaders in their fields, so make sure you take the time to pick their brains.

Can you think of someone who could use a conference experience to assist in their learning? If going to a conference builds your spirit, your mind, your heart, and/or your actions, it could do the same for a disengaged colleague.

2. Attend an in-depth seminar

One-off, deep-dive training sessions are ideal for helping to sharpen your technical skills. These include regulatory sessions, soft-skills builders and seminars about a new tool that will make your life so much easier once you master it.

If you find yourself attending one subject multiple times in your career, don't worry. There's always an opportunity to build on your existing knowledge. For example, when we have attendees visit us at multiple Uniform Guidance sessions, sometimes it's because they focused on procurement last time, and they're focusing on cost allocation this time. Sometimes, it's because they were six months on the job, and now with a year-and-a-half under their belt, they understand the acronyms and are less lost in the alphabet soup.

3. Attend recorded trainings

With COVID-19, virtual live and recorded on-demand learning may become the standard. You can set yourself up for success by:

- Determining the length of your learning attention span and scheduling your training to fit those time chunks.

- Knowing what distracts you and trying to eliminate those distractions as if you were on site.

- Deciding whether you like micro-learnings; quick, deep dives into one topic; or more general topics where you can pause, take breaks and then get back to the learning at hand.

- Watching training from trusted resources. Held by someone who knows what they are talking about and who you engage with, these trainings will help you further engage with their topic.

Once you have watched recorded trainings, offer teach-backs to others within your organization. You can have a group of people watch the same learning and then ask each of them to summarize what they heard, saw, took away, want to implement, etc.

4. Read (or reread) a book

Read or reread books that help invest in your knowledge. If you're an auditory learner, get your hands on the audio book versions. Statistics show we need to read or hear something seven times to remember it, so it's a good idea to reread oldies but goodies.

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Share a summary of what you read with others — it compliments what you read. Also, reread the notes you took before. You may learn something new this time around.

If someone recommends a book to you, pay attention. It's a compliment when someone cares enough to share what they value.
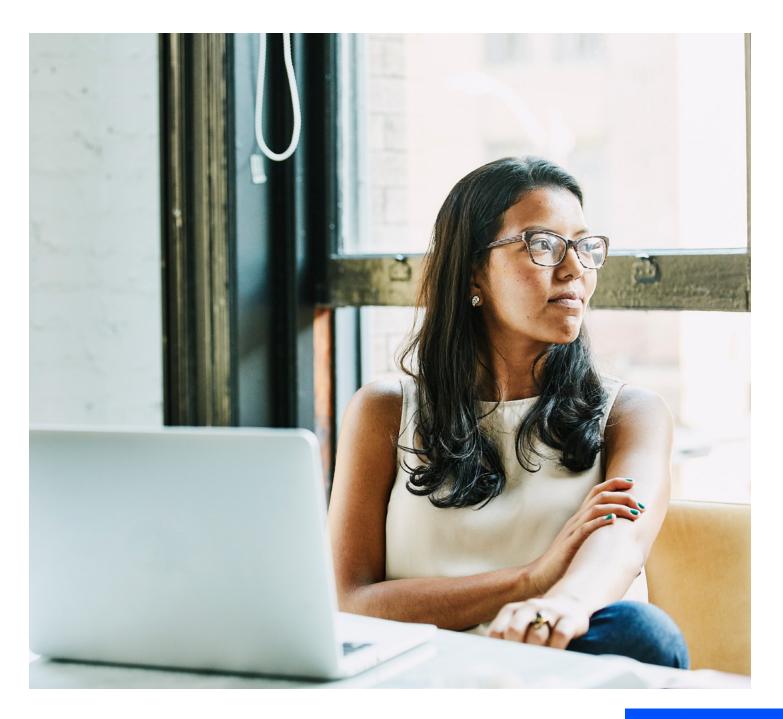
Solicit feedback from your employees, too. Do they have clarity about their role? Do they have everything they need? Is their equipment up to par?

5. Brainstorm with yourself and others

Talk through scenarios in your head or write/type them out. Some people are verbal processors, and this act of talking sparks ideas and solutions — even if you are talking about something totally different.

Connecting with a trusted mentor, peer, advisor or team member is a great way to learn and grow. As leaders, assuming we have all the answers is dangerous.

Be open to unplanned learning, too. When someone you trust suggests something, check it out. You never know what you will learn.

Assess your current culture

How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the culture of your organization?

Culture can be a vital ingredient to the ultimate success, viability and sustainability of any nonprofit organization. With culture's strong link to outcomes, employee engagement, productivity and client satisfaction, leaders must be proactive when it comes to managing change.

So, how should your organization assess its culture?

The first step is identifying the issues that currently exist within your organization. There are assessment tools you can use — such as Human Synergistics' Organizational Culture Inventory® — to measure culture in terms of the behaviors required to fit in and meet expectations within your organization. An assessment can help identify the current behavioral norms that are preventing your organization from reaching its ideal cultural state. The results can also help you identify behaviors of work groups/units within your organization to understand why some groups perform better than others.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed, but the goal is to start small. By implementing change at a lower level in the organization, the impact of that change is felt throughout the organization and impacts other cultural factors. Cultural change may take years, but it's important to start with one or two targets to focus on at a time. Start with defining cultural values and expected behaviors. And make sure you have ways to track and measure progress.

Take remote work to the next level

If your organization is among those with a newly remote workforce, now is the time to reevaluate and shore up your long-term approach.

- **Check your supplies:** It's in your organization's best interest to ensure all employees have high-quality, reliable hardware installed with the (approved) software and applications they need to work efficiently from home.

- **Prevent at-home injuries:** Be sure you know your obligations for employee health and safety. Provide ergonomic advice to help staff design and configure their at-home workspaces to avoid repetitive strain and back injuries. If you can, provide ergonomically designed chairs, computer equipment, etc. You may also want to follow in the footsteps of some tech companies, which offer employees a stipend to purchase appropriate chairs, standing desks and other necessities.

- **Don't forget cybersecurity:** Now is the time to take a hard look at your cybersecurity practices. Do you have a VPN for remote workers to use when accessing internal resources? Do you use multifactor authentication or other enhanced security? Do you have strict policies in place to help prevent inappropriate access or unapproved apps and software? If you answered "no" to any of these questions, consider a cybersecurity review and revamp.

- **Recognize the benefits of remote work:** Nonprofits can gain cost savings and other benefits by allowing remote work as an option going forward. Employees are more likely to stay with an organization that offers long-term remote work options. Flexible work policies lead to employees taking fewer sick days. Remote work lets you hire from a much larger pool of talent. You can even save overhead costs by reducing office space.

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Rethink how you manage remote employees

We shared the benefits of remote work, but there are downsides that managers need to help employees navigate and overcome. For example, compared to in-house teams, remote workers struggle more with unplugging after work, combatting loneliness, collaborating with coworkers, communicating and staying motivated.

Managing a remote workforce takes more than providing them with technology tools like email, video chats, videoconferencing and instant messaging. Managers must be willing to embrace new management approaches to keep remote workers engaged and productive.

Here are four ways to overcome those challenges:

1. Set clear expectations

Have you had frank conversations with your remote employees so they know what you expect and what to expect from you? It's crucial to provide clarity about what each person needs from the working relationship.

Do you want status updates on projects? How? And how often? Do you want them to make decisions independently and inform you after or to get your approval first? When either of you reaches out, what's the expected response time? Does "quickly" mean an hour to you, or a week? Do you expect employees to respond to emails after 6 p.m.? On weekends?

If you're managing an entire team remotely, gather them online to discuss group expectations. Who is responsible for what? When does someone else need to be informed? Who should weigh in on decisions?

When they can't see an employee working, some managers fear that nothing is getting done. Setting clear expectations will keep you from micromanaging and remote employees from overreporting. Clarity promotes smoother workflows and builds trust on both sides.

2. Hold consistent check-ins

There's no set rule on how often you should meet, but you need to establish a consistent schedule and stick with it. It's easy for silence to be misinterpreted by remote employees who don't get visual cues on how they are performing.

If you have the tools, hold check-ins via video. The visual connection gives you a better gauge of an employee's understanding and ensures both of you are "present" for the call. Making eye contact will increase your engagement, too.

You can also use behavioral assessment tools, like the Predictive Index®, to help you understand what drives your employees. Each employee may need a different level of support to work effectively from home. Tailor your check-in approach based on behavioral assessment data. And make sure to ask remote employees:

- What do you think you could work on to provide the most value to the company right now?

- How can you adapt your behaviors to support your team, manager or other departments?

- What articles, books, online courses or webinars could help your career development?

- How can we help you maintain a work-life balance?

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3. Provide feedback

Whether positive or negative, it's important to provide feedback to remote employees just as you would to in-house team members.

Be proactive and specific. Establish clear, objective performance metrics and give them context. Remote employees can be isolated from your organization's big-picture goals or unable to see how their work supports others.

Don't get too hung up on productivity. Try to focus on the end goal and key results, not the exact number of minutes someone sat at a desk.

Solicit feedback from your employees, too. Do they have clarity about their role? Do they have everything they need? Is their equipment up to par?

4. Help keep remote workers productive

It's important for you, as a leader, to feel confident in your team's productivity. And that means increasing accountability without micromanaging. Some things you can do include scheduling regular check-ins with employees and project status meetings, as well as setting clear, measurable expectations — and following up with status reports.

It's also important to recognize that remote employees are facing a unique set of circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many are working in less-than-ideal circumstances. So instead of fearing that remote workers might be slacking, consider that most need additional support and resources right now.

What can you do?

- Use video for your meetings so they can see you and connect with each other.
- Encourage dedicated workspaces and provide resources for equipment.
- Be flexible with work schedules.
- Maintain schedules that separate work life from family life.

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Use best practices to hold productive meetings online

Whether you're meeting with fellow employees or with clients, you can follow these four simple tips to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of your online meetings:

1. Double-check your technology

Before the meeting starts, make sure participants are using technology approved by your organization — and that it works. Some online meeting services require an initial download that can eat up precious time, so make sure everyone downloads before the meeting begins.

Test software in advance to identify microphone or camera troubles, too. Most services allow you to test your audio and video settings before a meeting begins. Take the time to make sure everyone can hear and see what's going on.

2. Stick to an agenda

Just as with an in-person meeting, you want to have a clear agenda laid out before the meeting begins. A few bullet points in an email can be a good guide and help keep the meeting on track. Include the names and contact information of any planned speakers to make it easier for attendees to follow up with the right participants.

Have clear start and end times for online meetings, and don't let them run over. Be considerate of attendees' time constraints and use a reservation system to avoid conflicts across teams.

3. Minimize distractions

Remote meetings have a higher potential for distraction. Attendees can browse the web during the call, pets or children might compete for someone's attention, and outside noises can cause disruption and confusion.

To help mitigate these challenges, encourage remote team members to use a quiet, dedicated workspace for meetings. At a minimum, provide best-practice guidelines for online meetings, such as muting audio when a participant isn't speaking.

4. Take notes — and share them

Assign someone to take detailed notes and to edit, organize and distribute them after the meeting. Many meeting tools include the ability to record a meeting — but technological issues can happen.

If you record a meeting, distribute a link to the recording and a copy of the notes after the call. That way, even if someone had a technical issue or missed part of the meeting, they can stay updated — or refer to them days or weeks later.

Manage employees' fear and uncertainty

When situations change rapidly, organizations are forced to navigate a host of impacts, including funding gaps, new regulations and other unforeseen barriers. Just as importantly, they must understand the human response to events.

These four leadership practices can help leaders reduce fear and anxiety among employees:

1. Lead with intent and heart

Leaders are "change sponsors" during a crisis, making intentional leadership essential. Be visible to employees and key stakeholders, communicate frequently and use a variety of channels, like video. During these times, it's more important to be sincere and genuine than perfectly polished. Perfection isn't necessary — but sincerity is.

2. Listen, observe and assess

It can be more difficult to listen and observe during a crisis, but face-to-face discussions, focus groups and quick check-ins with employees will help leaders understand what people are dealing with (or what they're afraid of).

3. Be deliberately calm, confident and realistic

In times of crisis, leaders can be a source of deliberate calm. Employees and stakeholders know there are tough decisions ahead, so leaders should be as transparent and straightforward as the situation allows. Employees look to leaders for confidence as well as realism. Bring both.

4. Always take action, even if it's imperfect

Actions are iterative; there's no "one and done" event. Establish a routine and a cadence to help employees adjust to fear and uncertainty as the situation changes. But note that waiting until you have a perfect message and strategy can cause more harm than good because it presents opportunities for misinformation and rumors to spread.

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Boost employee morale

During uncertainty, your organization can be a source of calm and support for employees. Here are four ways you can buoy the morale of remote workers during stressful times:

1. Keep lines of communication open

Honest and transparent communication is critical during a crisis. Address the situation with your employees as soon as possible, even if you don't have a final plan or there are unanswered questions. Discussing the problem upfront shows the workforce that executives, managers and employees are in the situation together.

Hold meetings — virtually, if necessary — to discuss your plans and encourage questions and dialogue. Create a forum (perhaps online) for staff to raise concerns and offer suggestions. Open communication can also dispel false, harmful rumors during times of distress.

2. Be flexible and empathetic

Try to be flexible and understanding with employees who are dealing with personal and work-related upheavals. Listen to employees' problems and help them, to the degree that you can. Employees are [eight times more likely](#) to stay at an organization where they have supportive bosses — and that was during "normal" times.

3. Give workers an emotional break

Everyone needs spirit-restoring breaks during a crisis, even if they're not comfortable admitting so at work. Offer employees the time, tools and emotional support they need to be resilient. Encourage workers to take brief walks, meditate or spend a few quiet moments alone each day. Give workers permission to manage their emotional health during the crisis and ask leaders to model that behavior.

4. Measure stress

Some stress, like the stress that comes from meeting new challenges, can help people expand their skills, raise their income and foster creativity. But excessive or long-term stress can cause serious illnesses, depression and anxiety. So how can you tell whether your team's workplace stress levels are normal or a problem that needs attention — especially when you're not working face to face?

Observe their behavior:

- Are they experiencing issues with social isolation from their remote work situation?
- Are they fearful or worried about their health or that of their loved ones?
- Have they been in less contact than usual?
- Are they exhibiting more signs of sadness?
- Do they seem nervous, sullen or irritable?
- Do they have trouble concentrating?
- Have they stopped caring about their work?
- Are they struggling to balance working at home and caring for family members who may also be at home?

Keep in mind that working too much can also be a sign — and a source — of stress. It might indicate that there's too much work-related pressure, which can lead to exhaustion, poor performance and, eventually, burnout and attrition.

Employees and managers need to acknowledge and resolve sources of stress. Encourage managers to hold open discussions and get feedback about work procedures and obstacles. Then follow up to make sure solutions are implemented, and track their effectiveness.
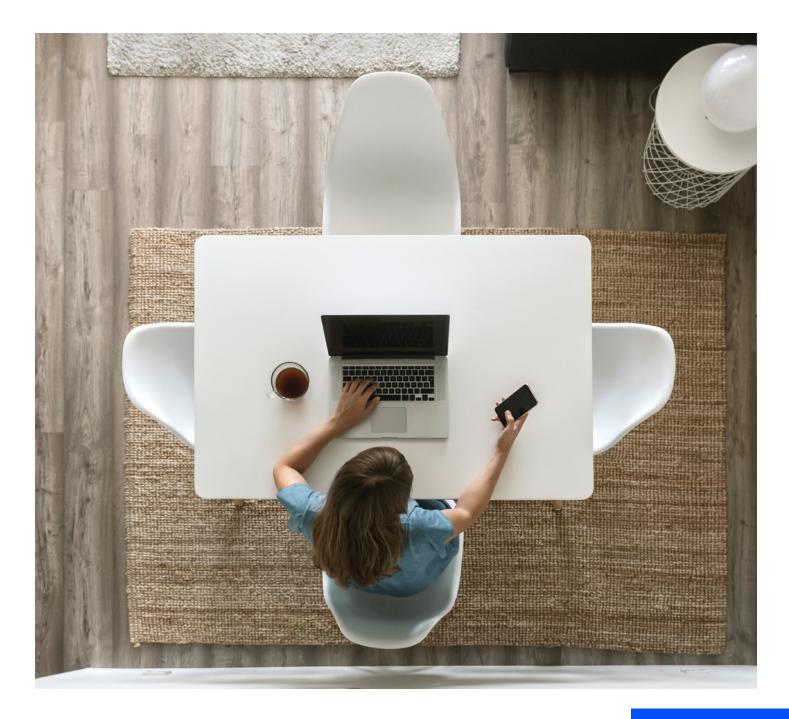
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Assess your technology

Shifting to a partial or fully remote workforce has required you to reassess technology and acquire the tools your organization needs to support remote work.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, nonprofits have also shifted to virtual service delivery for clients.

Setting your organization up for future success will require taking a hard look at your key technology systems, including your financial, HR, program and intake systems. Nonprofits must have a solid technology plan.

Perform a technology health check to assess the current state of your tech environment, looking at all applications and infrastructure needs. Through a strategic analysis, you should get an understanding of the steps you can take to refocus and realign your technology with your organization's immediate needs, long-term goals and mission.

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Solutions to meet your needs

Optimize in-house and remote talent

You probably know that trust, collaboration and communication are core ingredients to a great team. But how do you design a winning team and scale it across your organization for repeat success?

As a Certified Partner of the Predictive Index® — the world's leading talent optimization platform — Wipfli offers the top talent optimization tools to help you hire the right people, inspire them to achieve and engage them in your urgent and important work.

Learn more about talent and change solutions

Measure and master your culture

If your talent, operations and culture aren't aligned, any new project or goal can experience costly delays and head-scratching resistance, no matter how logical the approach. Our analysts can evaluate how well your organization is positioned for change with Wipfli's culture, climate and change readiness solutions, powered by Human Synergistics.

Learn more about strategy and operations solutions

Enhance your technology

When it comes to remote work, technology is the first and most critical component of your solution. Wipfli is here to help. We've developed quick-start solutions to support remote work and facilitate operational processes during this disruptive time.

With Wipfli, you can enable remote team members to interact with their counterparts anywhere in the world, fostering collaborative work while maintaining social distancing.

Remote work increases the attack surface and limits internal IT's capabilities to respond to cyber incidents. Wipfli's cybersecurity services can help prevent, detect and respond to the increased threats during this unusual time.

Learn more about technology solutions

Let's get started

Contact us today to leverage our strategic and tactical insights and skills to help you maximize the effectiveness of your remote teams.

Email gfpbd@wipfli.com or visit wipfli.com/nonprofits

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