

Navigating Through Rough Seas

For-Purpose Board Leadership in Times of Crisis

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The coronavirus pandemic presents complex issues for boards of for-purpose organisations. Many are now under pressure to increase services to their communities whilst their human and financial resources are stretched and fundraising, and other income is potentially at risk. The magnitude of the crisis faced by these boards is unprecedented.

However, amid this uncertainty and disruption boards have an opportunity to reframe their role and make critical contributions to help their organisations respond.

Refer [here](#) to the full paper by John Morrow and Wendy Scott-Hamilton that outlines seven key areas of focus we believe boards need to consider as they steward their organisations through this crisis. These areas are:

1. Your People
2. Your CEO / General Manager
3. Clarity of Roles and Responsibilities During the Crisis – Board v Management
4. Early Organisational Focus
5. Keeping Finger on the Pulse
6. Internal and External Communications Strategies
7. Virtuoso Leadership...not traditional Governance

For your ready reference, the questions John and Wendy pose (as revised) are set out below:

1. Your People

Key questions:

- Has the Board evaluated management plans to protect the health and safety of employees, volunteers, and those beneficiaries / service users in the organisation's care? Particularly, has it reviewed the plans for those in its communities that are more at risk, or highly concerned about the virus, or facing discrimination?
- Has the Board considered how to mitigate the financial impact of absences due to illness, as well as care of families and others, including review of the organisation's sick leave policy?
- Has the Board reviewed the impact of closures of certain operations / programmes on employees, volunteers, beneficiaries, partners, funders and donors?
- Has the Board and management developed a joint calling plan to speak to key funders and donors to update and check in on their care?
- Has the Chair arranged with the CEO / GM to regularly check in on them at this time?

2. Your CEO / GM

Key questions:

- Is the Board readily available for emergency conference calls, and individual calls, from the CEO / GM for quick counsel to talk through scenarios and provide their expertise and access to networks?

- Has the Board reprioritised work and adjust expectations on the CEO / GM delivery and reporting to free up CEO / GM capacity?
- Has the CEO / GM been given permission to openly share management reports on key performance indicators with the Board, without feeling the need to refine or add commentary that involves extra work?

3. Clarity of Roles and Responsibilities During the Crisis – Board v Management

Key questions: First order

- Has the Board assessed the need and desire of the management team for increased Board involvement in their organisation's response to the COVID-19 outbreak? Has the Board considered creation of a crisis committee to enable management to have ready access to Board Members between Board meetings?
- Have the Board and management team agreed on any shift of roles and responsibilities at this time?
- Have adequate safeguards been established to elevate engagement of the Board while minimising distractions for management?

Key questions: Board/governance continuity

- Does the Board have the capacity and is it appropriately positioned to provide guidance and oversight as the COVID-19 threat intensifies? Are Board members able to offer the availability and time commitment required?
- Can every Board member utilise technology to continue to meet and make decisions, while it cannot meet in person? Does the constitution allow for decisions to be ratified in these circumstances?
- Are Board members—and the management team — taking sufficient precautions to limit their own exposure to the virus?
- Are there emergency succession plans in place in the event that the members the management team become ill? Do the governance policies provide a clear line of authority and decision making in the case of absences by the CEO / GM, and a contingency in the event a Board quorum is not available?

4. Early Organisational Focus

Key questions: Focus on critical actions for ongoing impact

- Has the Board reviewed management's plan for continuing critical programmes?
- Are there specific plans around keeping the beneficiaries and others that it serves safe?
- Has the Board challenged management on the opportunity that COVID-19 presents to move away from programming that is no longer aligned with the organisation Mission?

Key questions: Focus on core operations and continuity

- Has the Board reviewed management's plan for stabilising its operations?
- Has Board reviewed management's efforts to identify, prioritise and manage potentially significant risks to ongoing business operations?
 - What activities or services would the organisation need to curtail if specialised volunteer attrition became an issue?
 - Do internal resources need to be reallocated to ensure critical activities can continue?

- What specific goods are required to continue the mission at full capacity, what is organisation doing now to secure those supplies?
- Are any significant vulnerabilities in cybersecurity being addressed?

Key questions: Focus on immediate actions required to manage cashflow

- Is the Board satisfied as to the ability of the organisation to remain financially viable during these times, and be in a position to provide ongoing support to its beneficiaries?
- Has the Board been able to clearly assess the ways that the organisation is able to help in the current situation, and reviewed what is core versus non-core programmes?
- Has the Board considered its stewardship of current partners, funders and donors at this time, and reviewed the communication strategy in connecting with potential supporters?
- Has the Board reviewed the pro-bono and in-kind support that the organisation needs at this time?

Key questions: Focus on future scenarios and risk assessment of impacts

- Has the Board identified 3-4 scenarios to plan the organisation’s response to the crisis? Has the Board considered the true worst-case possibility?
- Do these scenarios change with different timeframes? What information is missing or potentially inaccurate?
- What are key enterprise risks for each scenario? What are the organisation’s greatest vulnerabilities?
- With the resources we have how can we prevent the worst from occurring?

5. Keep Finger on the Pulse

Key questions:

- Does the Board have sufficiently visibility and capacity to readily process fast-changing information about this crisis? How can it ensure that it uses the right sources of information to keep effectively adapting its understanding of and response to this crisis?
- Does the Board have tested protocols in place for each communication channel, to gather and provide relevant and up-to-date information as to all impacted areas of the organisation?
- Does Board and management understand the areas of disruption caused by Covid-19 that are most likely to impact the organisation to help frame their initial response? Are Board and management of the same mind as to what should be done now, and what is required in the immediate days / weeks?

6. Internal and External Communication Strategies

Key questions:

- Has the Board reviewed list of key external stakeholders that need to be communicated to?
- Is there a clear strategy around who communicates what?
- Has Board reviewed the internal and external communication strategies and sought updates?
- Is the Board regularly communicating even when they don’t have all the answers?

- Is leadership demonstrating the composure to reassure all stakeholders that the organisation is in safe hands?
- Has the Board considered likely hostile questions from the press, government and funders that could erode public confidence and trust?

7. Virtuoso Leadership...not traditional Governance

Key questions:

- Does your Board or management have experience in crisis management that you can draw on?
- What actions can you take to address the situation in an incremental way?
- What measurements and/or feedback loops do you have to sense the results of these actions and understand any unintended consequences
- Can the Board provide the CEO / GM with the freedom to take action within clearly defined boundaries?
- Can the Board provide reassurance to the CEO / GM that they in full support of them for the duration of the crisis (otherwise may need to quickly replace)?
- In amongst the chaos does the Board continue to guard the mission and the people the organisation serves?