

Resilience at Work

How Nonprofits Adapt to Disruption. How Funders Can Help.

Today and in the future, there is one thing social change leaders can be sure of: they will experience disruption, uncertainty, and significant change. Whether recovering from a hurricane, navigating global health concerns, responding to shifts in public policy, or regrouping after the departure of a top leader, nonprofits that get intentional about cultivating organizational resilience are better at anticipating and adapting to disruption.

Resilience is critical for surviving these turbulent times. Nonprofit organizational resilience is the ability to respond effectively to change and adapt successfully to new and unforeseen circumstances while staying true to mission. At their best, resilient nonprofits respond to disruptions as tipping points, rather than tragedies, finding new opportunities to learn, grow, evolve, and, ultimately, better serve their communities.

So, what does it take for nonprofits to survive and even thrive amid shocks and disruptions? Through our research, seven characteristics stood out as critical to resilient nonprofits:



1. **Purpose driven:** A galvanizing commitment to mission, meaning, and values



2. **Clear eyed:** Challenges faced head-on while maintaining faith in ultimate success



3. **Future oriented:** Forward-looking planning practices for navigating an uncertain future



4. **Open:** Intentional communication with internal and external stakeholders



5. **Empowered:** Inclusive organizational culture that embraces shared leadership



6. **Committed to self-renewal:** Space created for rest and rejuvenation



7. **Connected:** Supported by personal relationships, institutional links, and community networks

There is no one recipe for resilience. Context matters – a lot. And, adapting to disruption and uncertainty will never be a linear journey. Nonprofits can expect periods of growth, setback, adaptation, and, yet again, disruption. Resilience is a way of being, not an endpoint. This is a reality many nonprofits know well. However, it's less readily acknowledged by funders and, even less, a topic for open discussion among funders and their grantees.

Funders can help by normalizing the experience of nonprofit disruption. Through authentic, open, and lasting relationships, funders in partnership with nonprofits can craft supports that meet the specific needs of the moment and the emerging future. The following principles can help pave the way for funders who want to enhance nonprofit resilience:

- **Come to the table.** Be a student of nonprofits and their context, so when disruption strikes you can offer meaningful support.
- **Stay at the table.** Listen intently, remain committed, and give nonprofits the space to craft a response to disruption. Inquire and offer support, while also recognizing that remaining committed may mean sitting back when a nonprofit is navigating turbulence.
- **Stand in the nonprofit's shoes.** Commit to building awareness of your biases and blind spots. Recognize the many ways the systems, codes, and cultures of philanthropy can perpetuate inequities and use that awareness to confront the power imbalances inherent in many funder relationships.
- **Be in open dialogue with nonprofits.** Invite candid and authentic conversation. Learn together with grantees about current and potential disruptions and how you can help nonprofits to prepare and respond.
- **Keep nonprofits' needs at the center.** Sometimes your own funder-driven initiatives will be relevant to the needs of nonprofits experiencing turmoil. Sometimes they won't. Keep the unique context and needs of individual nonprofits front of mind, recognizing that no one size will fit all.

In many ways, these are simply reminders of “good grantmaking” principles, which can be easy to lose sight of when disruption strikes. Hand in hand, nonprofits, with funders at their side, can navigate turbulence, learn, and adapt to new realities.

RESILIENCE AMIDST COVID-19

This study publishes in the spring of 2020 – a time when the COVID-19 pandemic rages, causing untold human suffering and threatening the viability of nonprofits whose work is vital to society today and tomorrow. Resilience is a watchword of the day, and we hope that the insights captured in this report can help point the way for nonprofits and funders working tirelessly to respond and adapt to the new realities caused by the pandemic. As the pandemic and its ripple effects unfold, we are certain there will be much more to learn about what it takes to respond and adapt to a global disruption of this magnitude.

Read the full report: doi.org/10.15868/socialsector.36542

