

Resiliency Guide

Nonprofit organizational resilience is the ability to respond effectively to change and adapt successfully to new and unforeseen circumstances while staying true to mission.



Growing Resiliency

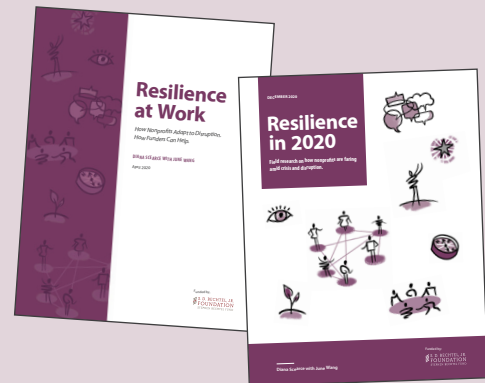
IT BEGINS WITH DIALOGUE

Nonprofits that are intentional about cultivating organizational resilience are better at anticipating and adapting to the disruption, uncertainty, and significant change that are a constant in our world. There is no one recipe for resilience. Context matters – a lot. And, adapting to disruption and uncertainty will never be a linear journey. Resilience is a way of being, not an end destination. This is a reality many nonprofits know well. However, it's a point less readily acknowledged by funders and, even less, a topic for open discussion among funders and their grantees.

The *Resiliency Guide* is designed to help funders and nonprofits engage in candid dialogue about the complex, turbulent environments nonprofits operate in, and to reflect on organizational strengths as well as areas that may benefit from attention. As a tool for grantmakers, it can prompt new thinking about where, when, and how to invest in capacity building.

The *Guide* was originally developed in 2014 by the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, which, as a limited-life foundation, had an especially strong interest in helping nonprofits develop the resilience to thrive long beyond its 2020 sunset. Over the years, the *Guide* underwent several iterations as the Foundation's understanding of resilience evolved.

This is the fifth and final iteration of the *Resiliency Guide*. It is informed by findings from *Resilience at Work*, [a study of resilience](#) published in spring 2020, as well as *Resilience in 2020*, [a follow-up study](#) that examined resilience in the context of 2020's tumultuous events.



ABOUT THIS TOOL

The *Resiliency Guide* features a single page devoted to each of seven resiliency factors:



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. Agile: Future-oriented, inclusive planning and adaptive management 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

Each factor is briefly defined and accompanied by a set of discussion questions, as well as examples of potential steps an organization might consider taking to strengthen resiliency in a given area.

A curated set of additional resources is included at the back.

The seven resiliency characteristics help nonprofits adapt in the face of disruption while staying true to mission. In order to adapt (and to simply survive), a nonprofit must also have the assets to keep its enterprise going and to enable a timely, effective response when crises hit: a financial cushion, ready access to talent, and solid organizational infrastructure (e.g., secure and up-to-date IT systems). The seven resiliency factors lift up the qualities that help nonprofits use these assets to adapt during turbulent times.

While it's critical to support the talent and ingenuity of individual organizations, the resilience of nonprofits is equally if not more dependent on the systems in which they're working. In the words of one nonprofit leader, there needs to be an "analysis of the external trauma imposed by these systems on the populations we serve and our organizations." For funders, this means assessing and investing in the long-term systemic changes critical for moving toward an equitable future (e.g., reimagining criminal justice and economic systems). It also means examining and shifting the system of philanthropy itself (e.g., addressing the inequitable access that Black-led nonprofits have historically had to donor networks).



1. Purpose driven

A galvanizing commitment to mission, meaning, and values

An unwavering focus on purpose and impact provides meaning and motivation to people and organizations mired in challenges. In resilient organizations, this commitment to purpose is not only held at the top – it’s shared and often expressed through a set of organizational values or a common analysis of what’s needed to make change. Values are a compass to help align staff and stakeholders in times of confusion and conflict.

IN PRACTICE

- Vision, mission, and values are shared at all levels of the organization
- Priorities, decisions, and actions are guided by this shared understanding and a clear strategic direction
- Organizational purpose and priorities reflect the vision and voice of communities served

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the big idea behind the organization? If it didn’t exist, would there be a compelling reason to create it now?
2. Who does the organization exist to serve, and what is their vision for the work? How do the characteristics of the people whom the organization hopes to serve compare with those it actually serves?
3. What are the organization’s key values, and how are they expressed through the work? When and how often are they invoked or discussed?
4. Is there general agreement, internally and externally, about how to pursue the organization’s purpose? Is there general agreement that the organization is doing what it should be doing?
5. What difference is the organization making now? How do you know?

IDEAS TO EXPLORE

- Assess the degree to which stakeholders are aligned in their understanding of the organization’s long-term goals and near-term priorities, as well as how these goals and priorities contribute to the mission (e.g., through surveys, interviews, or focus groups)
- Make stakeholders’ assumptions about the organization’s goals and approach visible (e.g., through a theory of change process)
- Engage staff at all levels in facilitated discussion to define organizational values, assess and address gaps between stated values and practices, and enact values in times of disruption
- Examine recent decisions to assess the role values do or do not play in decision-making, and explore opportunities to center values in the day-to-day work moving forward (e.g., as part of a decision-making screen, especially when managing through conflict)



2. Clear eyed

Challenges faced head-on while maintaining faith in ultimate success

Resilient leaders and organizations are clear eyed about the challenges at hand, what it's going to take to overcome them, and what's possible given the available resources. They understand and accept the facts, they maintain hope, and they persist.

IN PRACTICE

- Realistic view of the challenges ahead and whether/how they can be addressed
- Optimistic outlook for the ability to prevail in the long-term, despite the immediate reality
- Perseverance; making daily progress while maintaining stamina for the future

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the major challenges ahead for the organization? Are leaders able to articulate a path forward in light of these challenges?
2. What data or insights is the organization relying on to assess these challenges? Who is involved?
3. What do critics of the organization or approach say? How would you respond to their criticisms?
4. What else could or should be learned to give the organization a comprehensive view of the factors that will influence its ability to succeed?
5. What assets and opportunities are available in the current context?

IDEAS TO EXPLORE

- Collect current data on the community's strengths and challenges (e.g., through asset mapping, needs assessments, or discrete surveys, interviews, focus groups, or public dataset analysis)
- Form an advisory group to bring diverse perspectives to discussions of challenges and opportunities
- Encourage active debate of pros/cons and tradeoffs across a range of options for action (e.g., try facilitation techniques like [Liberating Structures](#))
- Break challenges down into tangible next actions for individuals and teams, and take time to celebrate as progress is made



3. Agile

Future-oriented, inclusive planning and adaptive management practices for navigating an uncertain future

Agility involves learning from recent efforts, applying that learning to upcoming decisions, and moving forward in an adaptive manner. An agile organization is also future oriented, regularly looking to the horizon, anticipating what's next, and adjusting accordingly. Highly inclusive learning and planning processes enable the broadest field of vision.

IN PRACTICE

- Opportunities and threats that may affect the relevance and power of the organization's strategies are assessed regularly
- A range of future scenarios is considered and rehearsed
- All levels of the organization, constituents, and allies are engaged in ongoing learning and planning processes
- Information from diverse sources is collected and used to assess progress and adapt to what's emerging

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the organization's assumptions about the future? How would plans need to shift if these assumptions did not hold true?
2. How does the organization approach planning? With what frequency? Who is and isn't included?
3. What trends are unfolding in the organization's field and in society that may affect its work? How are these trends identified, monitored, and discussed?
4. How does the organization reflect on what's working and what's not, and how do these insights inform upcoming decisions?
5. What information is used to assess progress and opportunities for improvement? Who decides what data to collect, whose voices to include, and what the data means?

IDEAS TO EXPLORE

- Treat strategic learning and planning as an ongoing process rather than a periodic event, and engage all stakeholders in it (e.g., explore the [Emergent Learning](#) framework)
- Engage in scenario thinking, including diverse perspectives on emerging trends, to challenge assumptions, inform strategy, and manage through change
- Develop systems for monitoring and making sense of shifts in the external environment that may be signals of change
- Systematically listen to constituent voices (e.g., through efforts like [Listen4Good](#))
- Train staff in evaluative thinking and invest in evaluative practices that integrate structural analysis and diverse ways of knowing (e.g., [Equitable Evaluation Framework](#))



4. Open

Intentional communication with internal and external stakeholders

Honest and direct acknowledgment of a disruption, the organization's current state, and what it knows and doesn't about its plans for moving forward is critical to keeping stakeholders on the same page and inspiring trust during times of uncertainty. True openness is not just about sharing information; it's also about listening.

Note: In this context, "stakeholders" refers to leaders and staff at all levels of the nonprofit as well as its constituents (the people and communities it serves), funders, and partners.

IN PRACTICE

- Capacity exists to engage in proactive and responsive two-way communication with stakeholders
- Information about the disruption and the path forward (both what is and isn't known) is shared honestly, clearly, and consistently
- Stakeholder input is sought and integrated through multiple channels; decision-making is explained
- Stakeholders are engaged with attention to their individual and cultural needs and empathy for how the situation may be impacting them

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does the organization have sufficient access to communications capacity and expertise? If not, how might that capacity be strengthened?
2. What channels are available to engage stakeholders in two-way communication? In what ways do decision-making processes integrate input from stakeholders?
3. Do stakeholders feel well informed by the organization? Do they feel their perspectives are heard and internalized by the organization?
4. How safe do stakeholders feel to bring forward questions, concerns, and ideas, and how readily do they do so? Who is the organization *not* hearing from, and what might be getting in the way?

IDEAS TO EXPLORE

- Establish multiple channels for internal dialogue: staff and team meetings, one-on-one check-ins, town halls during difficult times, staff feedback processes (e.g., employee engagement surveys, both "exit" and "stay" interviews)
- Proactively share information with external stakeholders and invite feedback (e.g., through blog posts, e-campaigns, social media, stakeholder meetings, one-on-one conversations)
- Create safe spaces for stakeholders to raise questions and concerns, anonymously if needed
- Gather feedback on communications to ensure alignment between intent and impact
- Explore ways to cultivate empathy (e.g., mindfulness training) and sensitivity to the impact of messaging and language on different stakeholders



5. Empowered

Inclusive organizational culture that embraces shared leadership

Resilient nonprofits have cultures of empowerment that are grounded in inclusivity. Staff are invited to make their voices heard, to co-create solutions, and to share leadership, especially in turbulent times. Leaders of resilient nonprofits actively flatten hierarchies and share power with their teams.

IN PRACTICE

- Diverse staff, reflective of and connected to the organization's constituents, are attracted and retained
- Staff at all levels, and especially those who identify with marginalized groups, feel valued and believe it is safe to voice their perspectives and co-create solutions
- Structures and practices are in place that encourage power and leadership to be shared across the organization and with constituents
- There is an organization-wide commitment to equity and the ongoing work required to advance it

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does the organization reflect the community it serves, especially among senior leaders? How does it embrace diversity of all kinds and at all levels?
2. How safe do staff feel to surface mistakes, concerns, and differences of opinion? How does the organization respond when these issues are raised? What's a recent example?
3. How are power and leadership developed and distributed throughout the organization? Where in the organization or community do new ideas and solutions come from?
4. What organizational habits or structures invite staff to collaborate across functions, departments, or levels of seniority?
5. How are decisions made, and how well are decision-making processes understood?

IDEAS TO EXPLORE

- Commit to the deep, continuous work of developing an equity culture (see [*Awake to Woke to Work*](#))
- Hire and advance leaders for their ability to empower and develop multi-cultural teams, drawing on their lived experience and understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Separate people from their mistakes, and create space to openly reflect on lessons learned from both successes and failures (e.g., through [*After Action Reviews*](#))
- Establish constructive norms and processes for exploring diverging views and resolving conflict
- Explore how empowerment is reflected in the organization's values and expressed in its practices



6. Committed to self-renewal

Space created for rest and rejuvenation

Navigating turbulent times requires deep emotional and physical reserves for nonprofit staff of all levels, and the risk of burnout is high. By actively prioritizing self-renewal, nonprofits can help cultivate the resilience of individual team members and, by extension, the resilience of the organization as a whole.

IN PRACTICE

- Self-renewal is invested in at all levels of the organization, and modeled at the top
- The work and the people behind it are celebrated
- The emotional experience of the change underway is recognized; models for understanding this change are offered

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are staff's highest priorities for their own wellbeing, and how do organizational norms and policies support these priorities?
2. In what ways do senior leaders model self-care (e.g., taking time off, sending email only during business hours, etc.)?
3. How do staff describe their stress levels? How are they supported to reduce stress?
4. How well do staff at all levels, and especially those who identify with marginalized groups, feel their work is recognized? How does the organization celebrate progress and appreciate staff?
5. What time and resources are made available to help staff process their emotions, especially during a time of disruption or change?

IDEAS TO EXPLORE

- Co-create clear work-life boundary and self-care norms, and model them at the top
- Offer generous leave (vacation, sick, personal, parental), flexible schedules, telecommuting, and a wellness fund for staff to use for self-identified self-care needs
- Convene employee support groups around staff-identified identities (e.g., BIPOC, LGBTQ+, caregivers, etc.)
- Develop a culture of authentic appreciation, recognizing contributions daily and through formal recognition programs, and being alert to patterns in terms of who is and isn't recognized
- Create spaces for dialogue about how staff are experiencing the disruption underway; use frameworks for understanding transitions (e.g., [William Bridges's Transition Model](#))



7. Connected

Supported by personal relationships, institutional links, and community networks

Many organizations that bounce back from disruption feel connected rather than alone – and this helps fuel their recovery and adaptation. This experience of connectedness can be especially powerful when the relationship is with individuals, groups, and communities outside the nonprofit, like coaches, peer support networks, affiliate networks, institutional partnerships, and communities that rally around the nonprofit in tough times.

IN PRACTICE

- Leaders have tight personal relationships in which they can be vulnerable (e.g., coaches, close-in advisors) and access to peer networks
- The organization is embedded in webs of institutional relationships, including current and potential partners and organizational networks
- The organization's constituencies support and reinforce the mission

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Where and who do leaders turn to for support in turbulent times? How do they use these supportive relationships?
2. What peer support networks do leaders and staff have access to (e.g., groups of peers in similar roles within their organization, in peer organizations, and/or working in similar sectors that can share relevant experiences)? How do they give back to these networks?
3. What formal networks, existing partnerships, or other institutional relationships does the organization have? How might these be activated in responding to crises?
4. How does the organization engage with community members? What are community members' perceptions of the nonprofit's work and contributions?

IDEAS TO EXPLORE

- Invest in leadership coaching
- Join or initiate peer networks, and make time and resources available for staff to participate
- Assess, broaden, and deepen network connections (e.g., map the organization's connections, cultivate new reciprocal relationships, and contribute to existing networks)
- Invite community engagement and support through regular communication and periodic community events or feedback processes

How Funders Can Contribute to Nonprofit Resilience

Cultivating resilience will never be a linear journey, nor is it one that is entirely within the control of the nonprofit. Nonprofits and their funders can work together to take a holistic approach to cultivating resilience for the long term, which would naturally include flexible, multi-year funding.

The *Resiliency Guide* was created to help nonprofits and their funders think together about resiliency and what it takes to build or enhance it. This section is meant to help funders reflect on their approach to supporting grantees in an increasingly volatile context, including surfacing policies, processes, or requirements that are outdated or don't serve grantees well. The following questions and ideas can help funders align intention with action – and improve their grantee partnerships along the way.

PRINCIPLES

Recent research on nonprofit resiliency yielded insights from nonprofit leaders about what they most value in their relationships with funders in times of turbulence. Here, these inputs are summarized in five core principles.



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.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you know if your grantees were going through turbulent times?
2. How do your existing grantee relationships as well as foundation habits, processes, guidelines, initiatives, and collaborations help (or hinder) nonprofit resilience? How can your foundation best support nonprofits in times of turmoil?
3. How does your grantmaking culture and approach leave space for ongoing learning, adaptation, and shifts in strategy and expected outcomes?
4. How can program staff be supported in learning about grantees and the changing context for grantees' work?

IDEAS TO EXPLORE

- Conduct regular scans to ensure up-to-date understanding of the context for grantees' work, tapping into collaborative datasets whenever possible
- Normalize conversations about disruptions by encouraging grantees to articulate their concerns and needs regularly and informally; offer confidential channels for grantees to share information and feedback periodically (e.g., consultants, [CEP Grantee Perception Report](#))
- Be transparent with grantees about any anticipated changes to your grantmaking priorities
- Approach grant outcomes in a way that reflects trust in your grantees and honors the complexity and adaptive nature of their work; be ready to adjust expectations based on new insights
- Make sure a focus on grantee resiliency is reflected in the foundation's communications (e.g., website, grant guidelines, etc.)
- Provide support for grantees to build resiliency (e.g., resources for scenario thinking, self-care for individual leaders and their teams, constituent engagement)
- Provide long-term, flexible funding that supports grantees in building reserves, which can be critical when making the investments needed to adapt to change
- Make connections for grantees (e.g., to other funders, peer networks, potential partners, sources of talent and knowledge)
- Bring new funders to the table, and invest in platforms and processes that help groups of allied organizations strengthen their own fundraising efforts
- Simplify grant application and reporting requirements, shouldering as much of the burden as you can and adopting a common approach with other funders whenever possible
- Explore the [Trust-Based Philanthropy](#) model for additional inspiration and guidance

Learn More

SELECT RESOURCES FOR ALL READERS



	Resource Type	Purpose driven	Clear eyed	Agile	Open	Empowered	Committed to self-renewal	Connected
<u>AWAKE to WOKE to WORK: Building a Race Equity Culture.</u> Equity in the Center. 2019	Report					✗		
"The Big Reset: Guidance for Nonprofits." Mario Morino. 2020.	Article	✗	✗	✗	✗			
<i>Emergent Strategy.</i> Adrienne Marie Brown. AK Press. 2017.	Book			✗		✗	✗	
"From Emergency Response to Resilient Futures: Moving Towards Transformation." Interaction Institute for Social Change. 2020.	Article/framework			✗		✗	✗	✗
<i>The Happy Healthy Nonprofit.</i> Beth Kanter and Aliza Sherman. Wiley. 2017.	Book						✗	
"How Resilience Works." Chapter by Diane Coutu in the book <i>Resilience</i> , HBR Press. 2017.	Article	✗	✗					
<u>Leading in Disaster Recovery: A Companion Through the Chaos.</u> Elizabeth McNaughton, Jolie Wills, David Lallemand. New Zealand Red Cross.	Report	✗	✗			✗	✗	✗
<u>Reimagining Strategy in the Context of the COVID-19 Crisis: A Triage Tool.</u> Center for Community Investment. 2020.	Guide/tool			✗				
"Resilience Is About How You Recharge, Not How You Endure." Chapter by Shawn Achor and Michelle Gielan in the book <i>Resilience</i> , HBR Press. 2017.	Article						✗	
<i>Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back.</i> Andrew Zolli and Anne Marie Healy. Free Press. 2012.	Book				✗	✗		✗
<u>What If? The Art of Scenario Thinking for Nonprofits.</u> Diana Scarce, Katherine Fulton, and the Global Business Network Community. 2004.	Guide/tool			✗		✗		
<u>A Whole Greater Than Its Parts: Exploring the Role of Emergence in Complex Social Change.</u> Marilyn Darling, Heidi Sparkes Guber, Jillaine S. Smith. Fourth Quadrant Partners, LLC. 2018	Report	✗		✗	✗	✗		

SELECT RESOURCES WITH FUNDER-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CULTIVATING RESILIENCE

"The Big Reset: Guidance for Funders." Mario Morino. 2020.

ENGAGE: How Funders Can Support and Leverage Networks. Monitor Institute by Deloitte.

Making it Happen: A Conversation Guide. A resource for foundations seeking to start providing, or provide more, multiyear general operating support grants. Center for Effective Philanthropy. 2020.

The New Normal: Capacity Building During a Time of Disruption. Adene Sacks, Heather McLeod Grant, and Kate Wilkinson. Open Impact. 2018.

"Racial Equity and Philanthropy: Disparities in Funding for Leaders of Color Leave Impact on the Table." Cheryl Dorsey, Jeff Bradach, and Peter Kim. Bridgespan. 2020.

Roadblock Analysis Report. Open Road Alliance. 2017. (Plus additional resources on Open Road Alliance [website](#)).

Trust Based Philanthropy Project resources.

A VISION FOR CALIFORNIA

The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation envisions a productive, vibrant, and sustainable California that is a model of success and a source of innovation.

A COMMITMENT TO NOW

California faces many critical challenges, which require resources and imaginative solutions.

In response to this reality, the Board of Directors decided to invest all the Foundation's assets by 2020. This decision reflects a commitment to identifying lasting solutions for education and the environment sooner, rather than later. The Foundation also invests in building the capacity and resiliency of grantee organizations to leave them positioned to carry on the work of furthering a successful California for decades to come.

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