10 Steps to a Nonprofit Issues Management Program

Nonprofits Need to Manage Risk Just Like Businesses Do

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Every business and nonprofit has challenges, today and in the future. Those challenges can come from a dozen different sources, but if you don't know what they are, they can't be managed. If they aren't managed, your organization will be taken by surprise again and again and put on the defensive by the media and the public. Issues identification and management should be part of your crisis management plan.

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1. Make issues management someone's responsibility.

It naturally seems to go with public affairs, public relations, or development. If your organization is not doing this, take it upon yourself to do it. When a crisis hits, the value of issues management will be recognized and you could be a hero.

2. Continually scan the environment.

Subscribe to the leading publications about the nonprofit world and to those publications that cover your nonprofit's particular area of expertise. Attend conferences and meetings to learn about issues, and how your peers are dealing with them. Be alert to news stories, blogs that cover your area, and other organizations' newsletters. Train yourself to ask, "Could that affect us?"

3. Find patterns and notice repetition of themes.

When you see an issue crop up over and over again, take note and put together a file for it. Collect and save information on that issue. Set up an issues file on your computer and in your filing system. Keep a file folder ready on your desk to put information into when you come across anything that falls under any of the topics you have identified. Set up Google alerts for the keywords of your issues so you will receive news articles about them.

4. Identify the top issues.

Make a list of all the issues you've taken note of. Then, working with others in your organization, identify the top five or 10 issues that you think are likely to be relevant for your organization. Ask for time at a staff meeting to present your list and get feedback. Set up a meeting with your executive director to tell her what you are doing and to ask for her help in identifying the top issues.

5. Prepare position papers on each of those top issues.

The position paper should provide background information about the issue, include examples of the issue being a problem for other organizations, and specify why and how this issue could affect your organization. Document any action that your organization has taken to address the issue. If nothing has been done, suggest that this issue is important and some action should be considered.

6. Prepare a statement setting out your organization's stand on each issue.

State how your organization is addressing the issue...be specific as to what you have done and plan to do about it. Include copies of policies already in place to address that issue.

7. Circulate your position papers and statements to your leadership team.

Invite those leaders to a meeting where they can comment on the issues and advise you on how to flesh out the position papers or update them. Do this when you have rough drafts of the position papers. Be prepared to change a lot of this material as your leadership team brings its knowledge to the table.

8. Develop a notebook or file for issues management.

Prepare a notebook, or set up an online folder, that contains all of the position papers and make sure that all members of the leadership have copies. Make sure that board members have copies of the position papers. These make excellent additions to the materials that new board membersreceive. Get on the agenda of a board meeting to introduce your issues management program and to invite feedback.

9. Revisit all position papers at least once a year.

There is no doubt that setting up an issues management program is time consuming in the beginning. But once set up, it can be maintained fairly easily. At least once a year, update your list of issues, discard those that don't seem relevant any more, and add others that are new.

10. Use the issues file whenever an issue goes "live" for your organization.

When an issue goes "live" for your organization through some event or interest from the media, use the position paper as background to write talking points that you and others can use when speaking with the media, supporters, volunteers, clients, and other constituencies. Include "talking points" that support your message.

Such advance preparation will prove invaluable during a crisis or at any time when the spotlight is on your organization. Don't wait to be told to do this...probably no one will think of it. Just do it and your nonprofit and its leaders will appreciate and applaud your foresight and work.