

# How to Keep your Charity Afloat

Tips for Charity Leaders



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We continue experiencing the devastation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic with almost 3 million confirmed cases, more than 206,000 lives already lost and millions of jobs evaporated. Even with the positive signs in Australia that the curve is flattening and the possibility of relaxing some social restrictions soon, the full effect of the pandemic is yet to be seen.

Charity organisations and social enterprises provide an essential lifeline to help people get through this crisis and will be an essential part of the recovery efforts. The skills, knowledge and service of charity organisations are as critical as the government, yet more nimble, these organisations are now more than ever an essential tool for societies to address vital needs.

The domestic violence shelter, the food pantry, the local free clinic — these groups are typically run on shoestring budgets with volunteer staff. Charity leaders will not be surprised to hear that many executive directors work 65 hours a week and are paid for 20; this is on a good day and not reflective of the current pandemic environment.

In the past month or so many big and small charities in Australia are struggling under the weight of an extended period of high demand due to the bushfires being followed immediately by the Coronavirus. Many charities have had no break to recharge their batteries. The impacts of the pandemic have already created extra demand for services; for example, from international students who have lost their jobs and do not qualify for government support. They are experiencing financial distress and are seeking help for food pantry services; however, both food and financial donations and hours worked by volunteers are down.

## What can Charity Leaders do?

In the past six weeks at The Impact Suite we have seen some great examples of Australian charities adapting and innovating in order to continue providing the essential services to their beneficiaries.

For example, through the pandemic, organisations providing outreach medical services or cleaning and laundry services to homeless people were forced to re-think the way they were providing these essential services while observing social distancing restrictions and keeping their workers safe.

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An outreach medical services organisation decided to virtualise some of their medical consultation services when confronted with the new normal of social distancing, accelerating something that was in their future plans, enhancing and innovating their services in no time.

The [Harvard Business Review](#) has identified five key actions that will help business leaders to keep their charities afloat:

## Anticipate

Cathy (who asked that I not use her last name) runs a residence for women with dementia, many with serious underlying conditions, in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Her clients are without question the most vulnerable to Covid-19. Although she and her team have been vigilant and no one has been infected so far, she has already prepared a draft letter to share with her community should one of the residents fall ill.

The letter affirms that her organization is a caring one and that its high quality of service is undiminished. It notes that “the safety of our residents has and always will come first” and goes on to outline all the precautions that her team has taken so far, as well as more extensive measures (beyond government recommendations) that it would be considering in the wake of such a tragedy. It also promises continued open communication and commitment to its mission.

A good leader solves problems. A great one anticipates them. Right now non-profit leaders must ask the hard questions, consider the worst-case scenarios, and brainstorm all the different actions they can take right now to be ready *if* that happens.

## Create

Ellen LaPointe began her tenure as the CEO of Fenway Health two months ago. She’s learned more in the past two months than most new leaders learn in the first year — about the resilience of the staff and the deep, shared commitment they have to their clients. She offers a great deal to her new team in terms of strong management and leadership skills but in these early days the staff has taught *her* about what is possible.

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Before the pandemic, Fenway had decided to virtualize some of its medical consultation services. The team projected that this transformative initiative would take a year. However, when confronted with the new normal of social distancing, they realized they would need to speed up that process. Working feverishly, they introduced the new telehealth program in just five days.

In crisis, non-profit leaders must act with speed to innovate, execute, and deliver what people need.

## Nurture

Karen Pearl is the CEO of God's Love We Deliver, which prepares and delivering nutritious meals to New Yorkers homebound with chronic illnesses. When New York became the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak, she nurtured a variety of stakeholders, including employees and donors, via video conference; it was something like Franklin Delano Roosevelt's fireside chats in the 1930s.

She explained in detail how operations had changed, shared the stories of drivers going the extra mile, and described how carefully kitchen volunteers were cooking and packing. She brought her "tribe" closer to the organization and we can only expect she will continue to keep them close.

During challenges, leaders need to keep stakeholders close. The ability of your organization to recover once the clouds lift will be directly tied to how well you do this.

## Pivot

It's time to be nimble about crisis-time services and staffing. Are there new ways to be of use to your existing clientele and others in need? Can older volunteers, who are at higher risk for the virus, participate virtually, or can you find young people with more time on their hands than they had before — for examples from colleges or the arts community, or the gig economy workforce — to pitch in?

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Drew Dyson, the executive director of Princeton Senior Resource Centre, moved his education program, the Evergreen Forum online by offering tech support to professors and to his clients during the transition. A team of remote volunteers worked with hundreds of seniors to introduce them to Zoom and the initiative was a huge success. Instead of the anticipated 200 registrants, they had more than 500. You can bet that, even once the pandemic passes, PSRC will be offering more online programs to reach more clients previously not physically able to visit the centre.

Amit Paley and his team at The Trevor Project, a national 24-hour toll-free confidential suicide hotline for LGBTQ youth, executed a similar pivot. They set their 40 hotline volunteers up with secure laptops in their homes in less than a week.

## Ask

Gifted Wishes is a Seattle-based group that creates moments that matter for hospice patients. Gala revenue is the largest percentage of its small budget. Many others are in the same boat. Fundraisers are being cancelled left and right.

If your organization is struggling, it's important to be honest with donors about what you need to stay open. In a moment when many people are facing unforeseen financial challenges, this can be a hard ask. However, there will still be some individuals or grant-making foundations that can help cover potential shortfalls. Remember, too, to ask your board members for advice and assistance in securing government assistance loans for which you might be eligible and making connections with impact investors focused on Covid-19 relief and recovery.

Closing your doors along with the critical services you provide will compound the crisis for many, so don't be afraid to continue fundraising.

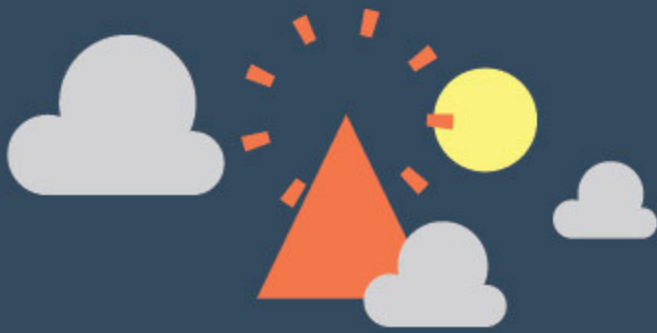
Our non-profits must survive so the least fortunate among us can recover from this pandemic. Even if your cause seems less relevant now — maybe run an animal shelter or a chamber orchestra — your organizations will be even more important as society again begins to function and people seek out love, communion, and beauty in the world.

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So keep reminding everyone about the ways in which your organization is unique, how you are working to repair the world, and why you need help now.

Source: The Impact Suite. [Joan Garry, Harvard Business Review](#), April 2020.





The Impact Suite was founded with a view that all social impact organisations, irrespective of their location or size, should have access to the best experts and ideas in order to maximise their impact for our community. Too many organisations struggle with limited resources, meanwhile stakeholders and donors tend to focus on simple measures like 'administrative expenses' while missing the value of impact. With founders from all aspects within the sector including charity founders, board/committee members, consultants, technology developers, and analysts - we have developed a proprietary Social Impact Rating which focuses on governance aspects and social impact of Australian charities.

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The Impact Suite's proprietary Social Impact Rating is only for Australian Charities and other social impact organisations. We have extensively researched and consider 5 key factors important to an organisation's sustainability and effectiveness in order for them to make a difference in our community. The Impact Suite has taken the symbolism of the lotus flower and used it as a vital measure of an organisation's sustainability with each petal representing the 5 key success factors - Purpose, People, process, Impact and Review. The Social Impact Rating helps anyone instantly identify good organisations.

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