



*Resilience is a complex set of characteristics and behaviors that are most observable during and after times of crisis. Exploring these dimensions can help develop new insight and strategies to increase resilience in the philanthropic and non-profit sectors.*

## Resilience Here and Now: How?

In this economic climate, the concept of resilience has new urgency for non-profits and their partners. Such uncertain times challenge the capacity and reserves of even the most established and innovative institutions to meet their missions. But what exactly constitutes resilience, and can certain interventions increase and sustain resilience?

Consider how resilience is observable only as a *reaction* to a disturbance or crisis. If you take a moment to brainstorm “what resilience looks like in action”, you’ll surface an internal tension: resilience requires both the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, and the ability to resist change. This creates interesting challenges in terms of how to identify and foster resilience in the non-profit sector.

There are applicable lessons, however, from other disciplines where the paradox of resilience has been deeply examined. These analytical frameworks suggest untapped opportunities and new strategies to strengthen resilience in the non-profit sector, including:

- cultivating characteristics that predict resilience
- incenting behavior that enhances resilience
- reinforcing systems that underpin resilience, and
- considering timing issues that affect resilience.

This working paper relates these frameworks to existing strategies in the non-profit sector, and poses questions to shape new, more effective action in the future.

### Characteristics:

Certain characteristics predict whether individuals or organizations will be resilient in the face of crisis. These include the ability to form attachments, ability to improvise, a sense of humor, deep shared values that give meaning to the challenge at hand, exceptional talents, and more. Optimism, surprisingly, is not as important as being grounded in reality; that is, the ability to accurately gauge conditions and options for action.

Using “characteristics” as a framework for understanding non-profit resilience suggests assessment tools and investments in capacity as the intervention strategy. This is already a common practice, often framed as “sustainability” strategies. In perfect world, we would have continually cultivated characteristics of resilience during both prosperous and difficult times, but the proof of success is only apparent at times like these, when there is widespread societal stress.

Do your current efforts sufficiently focus on characteristics of resilience? What characteristics can be strengthened *during* a time of crisis?

## Behaviors:

Behaviors are characteristics in action. Collaboration is one resilience-enhancing behavior that has been actively fostered by the philanthropic community, to increase both effectiveness and efficiency of non-profit work. On the other hand, another resilience-enhancing behavior, improvisation, can be constrained by funders who value precise work plans and proven approaches. The often-expressed desire to avoid “mission-creep” by focusing on “core purpose” can also inadvertently limit resilience by emphasizing resistance to change.

What are your underlying assumptions about behavior that enhances resilience, and what are the incentives and disincentives currently in place?

## Systems:

Inherent tensions within all systems create impetus for change as well as resilient responses. Underlying dynamics affecting resilience in many types of systems (political, social, economic, environmental, etc) are also relevant for the non-profit sector. They include:

- Redundancy and overlapping capacity (for example, in emergency management, telecommunications infrastructure, food distribution)
- Efficient flow of materials, investment and information to where needed (for example, the internet has created many opportunities for philanthropists and non-profits to play catalytic roles)
- Diversity of component parts as long as they all do not have the same vulnerabilities (e.g. in fragile eco-systems)
- Localized autonomy in responding to conditions, coexisting with interdependence and collaboration among system components
- Strength to resist a hazard force or attack, coexisting with adaptability and flexibility to learn and change (for example, work to strengthen “feedback loops” for learning and changing)

Many questions are embedded in even this short sample list. Where is the line between investing in redundant capacity and investing efficiently? How does ongoing evaluation serve the purpose of providing timely feedback as a resource for resilience? How does this framework affect your willingness and capacity to engage in the policy arena?

## Timing:

Organizations have life-cycles; eco-systems have growth and resting seasons; cultures have histories that influence what is possible at any given time. Timing matters for determining which strategies to emphasize, and what organizations can benefit. But timing windows, like resilience itself, are often only clear after the crisis has passed. Can funders help non-profits better see time-sensitive opportunities such as mergers before it is too late for such actions to be beneficial?

Unfortunately, key drivers of resilience may be dismissed during stable times as inefficient or irrelevant investments because their value is not demonstrable until a crisis emerges. Resilience during a crisis depends on what is cultivated during periods of relative stability or gradual change. Given this, once the operating environment settles into new patterns, does your focus change in terms of what aspects of community, non-profit and philanthropic resilience receive the most focus?

**Finally . . .** What are the three most important actions you can take now to increase resilience within your organization? In the organizations you fund? In the communities they serve?

## **Additional Resources:**

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