

Top 10 Actions  
a NY Library Board Can Take to Foster a Library's Mission  
and  
Ensure its Viability During the  
COVID-19 Pandemic crisis

**A note from the author:**

*When I was the in-house attorney at Niagara University (2006-2017), I had the privilege to be trained in the National Incident Management System's Incident Command System (ICS), the nation's system for organizing crisis response. At NU, I also co-authored the Pandemic Response Plan, and along with the IT Department, developed a system for not-for-profit "enterprise risk management" (addressing mission-threatening risks).*

*Through that work, I gained familiarity with the mechanics of pandemic response and recovery, and managing related issues.*

*Now, in collaboration with WNYLRC and other regional library councils, my law firm provides the "Ask the Lawyer" service to libraries. On a regular basis, I answer questions from libraries about board operations, property issues, and employee issues. Through that work, which I consider a great privilege, I have gained familiarity with New York's libraries (although there is always more to learn), and the strong, diverse people who run them.*

*In addition, on a regular basis, I call upon the excellent resources from New York's robust community of legal, regulatory, and career professionals, including the invaluable "[Handbook for Library Trustees in New York State](#)."*

*This "Top Ten" guidance is the distillation of all that experience, combined with what I know about the COVID-19 situation as of April 7, 2020. I hope it is helpful. If you identify ways to make it better, or clearer, or easier to implement, please write me at [adams@losaplhc.com](mailto:adams@losaplhc.com).*

*During a pandemic, all we can do it our best...on limited time.*

*I wish you strength as you lead your library through this crisis.*

*--Cole*

So, what are the "Top Ten Actions" a library board can take to foster a library's mission and ensure its viability during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis? Here you go:

**#1. Commit for each member to perform board work no less than weekly**

Why? As you will see in the Remaining 9 items, even if your library is closed or operating at less than full capacity, there is a lot you can do.

**#2. Set a “Crisis Response Goal” defining how your library will handle the current emergency and eventual recovery period.**

We all know the COVID-19 pandemic, and our communities’ recovery from it, will not be over in April... or May...or June. It will affect us long beyond 2020. The impact will be deep and far-ranging.

Knowing this, we also know that a community library, open to all, will be a **critical resource** for every member of your community in the times ahead. With that in mind, defining how to *preserve, promote, and connect* that resource to its area of service is this critical--even at this time of reduced operations.

How do you do that? It starts with a simple statement by your board's leadership, known as a “Crisis Response Goal.”

How does a board develop a Crisis Response Goal? By envisioning and articulating what it wants to do and be throughout and after the crisis.

What does that look like? A good Goal articulates and reinforces your library's unique role in the community, and sets forth *broad ways* it will fill that role during this unprecedented time (the Goal is not where you worry about minutiae).

An example Goal is:

*“During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, The Library will serve the community, fulfill its mission, and meet the goals of its plan of service by meeting the public's need for reliable information, providing access to critical resources, and serving as a hub of community organization.”*

The key is to focus on **what you will do** (not how you will do it).

The template to create your library’s Crisis Response Goal is:

*During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, The [NAME] Library will serve the community, fulfill its mission, and meet the goals of its plan of service by \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.”*

And that is your Goal...your library’s statement to the world about what it will be and do through this crisis.

The remaining items on this list are *how* your Board will rally your resources to make the Goal a reality.

### **#3. Use a “Crisis Response Team” approach**

At this time, an effective board is concerned about numerous things: The **safety** of the library and the community it serves, the **fiscal impact** of the current crisis, the reduced or eliminated **operations** of the library, its **relationship** with its community, making appropriate decisions about employees, the stewardship of the library's physical assets, and how to meet its plan of service.

No board can meet as a single body and address all of these things effectively, even if they meet once a week. There would be too many voices at the table (or too many people being seen and not heard). There would be no room for assessing facts and novel thinking.

How does a board handle this multi-faceted crisis situation? Create **teams**.

**What will those teams do?** Well, at least one person who can navigate the OSHA website should have primary and consistent responsibility for **safety**. At the same time, people with the fiscal skills and experience must gather to assess the immediate and long-term impact of the situation on the library's **finances**. Meanwhile, another group with business and HR skills and experience should focus on **mission** and **plan of service (“operations”)**. And finally, a person or small group with communications skills should have primary responsibility for thinking about **public relations** and **outreach** to the library's primary stakeholders.

Finally, one or two people should play the role of **team leader**. The Team Leader's primary role will be connecting the work of each group, and the professional staff, to enable critical decision-making and developing a response plan.

The **Team Leader** will also ensure the **library director** is supported as they continue their duties under a time of duress, that the **director** is positioned to contribute to the work of the teams as needed, getting them vital information, and collaborating on the formation of the library's strategic response.

The rest of this guide is about creating teams to use this approach.

### **#4. Assess your board's capacity, and reinforce it where needed**

When considering a crisis response team approach, which organizes a board into small sections working towards the same Goal, it is important to be honest about your capacity. As a group, you need to take stock of your board.

Many of the skills and attributes that make someone a valuable board member in non-pandemic times (fund-raising, deep knowledge of books and culture, ability to rally volunteers) might not be the only things needed during the initial phases of a pandemic response.

Further, many boards, faced with this crisis, may be feeling overwhelmed. Unless a person has guided a not-for-profit organization through a crisis such as a fire, major PR event, or disaster such as 9/11, the experience of the average board member might be tested by the current situation.

That is OK. **We are all feeling tested.**

The good news is, if your board does not have the capacity to assemble teams with the experience listed in #3, your board is allowed to add non-board members to non-voting committees, or to invite them to meetings as guest advisors. Now is the time to bring on a few “ringers.”

How can that be done?

If you don't have anyone on your board who feels up to the task of considering safety first at all times, invite someone on who has experience with OSHA regulations or standards from the New York Department of Labor.

If your fiscal team doesn't have access to a seasoned accountant or CPA who can assess the current budget, run fiscal projections, and help you develop models for your library's financial options, see if you can find one who will donate some time to your library.

If your board does not have someone experienced in business, employee relations or human resources, and you need to take action regarding contracts and employees, bring a new person on.

And if your board doesn't have someone with public outreach skills, perhaps you can find someone with appropriate experience from within your own community networks—or reach out to someone new.

As you **assess your board's capacity** and look to shore up any needs during this time of pandemic response, remember this: this is a special time. Some people may be working more than ever, and not able to help out more, or at all...while others are finding themselves under-occupied. Small business owners on your board may not be able to help at all. Others may be on unemployment and able to step into the gap. **ALL OF THAT IS OKAY.**

If you identify a gap in your board's experience, it may be that you can fill it just by asking. The important thing is to be honest about what your board can do, and not fudge it.

### **#5. Form your board's Safety Team**

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing incalculable impact on business operations and the functions of day-to-day society. However, it remains first and foremost a **public health crisis**. That is why, if you choose to use a crisis response team approach, the first team your board should appoint is the team responsible for **safety**.

What is the “**Safety Team’s**” role?

When the full board is considering a team's recommendation, **the safety team’s role is to ensure the board fully considers the safety implications of any one course of action.**

For instance, if there is a decision to have one library employee check the mail every day, the safety team is asking: *Is this safe? Is there a way it could be made safer?*

If your **Safety Team** has the time, they should also be available to your other teams during the later phases of crafting a recommendation, so work is not wasted. In addition, your **library director** should at least be a consulting member of this team, since they are in charge of the staff, and will be responsible for putting emergency procedures into effect.

Your Safety Team will spend time on public health resources such as the CDC website, the OSHA website, and will monitor your county health department's recommendations and advisories. **In any action related to your library's response, they are only thinking about safety and the health of the community. This includes the health and safety of employees, volunteers, and the board.**

While other members of your board, on other teams, may be worried about fiscal viability, public relations, or operations, your Safety Team is always putting **safety first**. This includes planning for the safety and well-being of your community when your library is contributing to your community's recovery.

The Safety Team takes on this primary responsibility so the other teams can focus on their roles, while the full board knows it is set up to always put safety front and center.

## **#6. Form your board’s Fiscal Team**

The current crisis is going to hit public libraries in a variety of ways, and for many, the fiscal hit will be especially hard.

While some communities will immediately rally around their library as a critical central resource, others may use the crisis as an opportunity to seek budget cuts and de-funding. Libraries that have relied on fines and hold fees as revenue sources will find those sources diminished. And always, there is the question of how to compensate and retain staff at this unprecedented time.

This is why appointing a **Fiscal Team** with the skills to assess the current situation, run projections, reach out to fiscal sponsors, and develop plans for the financial stability of your library is key.

While this group can be small, consisting of perhaps two or three people, it must be mighty. As mentioned in #4, at least one member—who might perhaps be an invited advisor or non-board committee member—should have seen a not-for-profit institution through a fiscal crisis in the past. You will need this person’s wisdom and perspective.

The immediate tasks of this group will be assessing the impact of the situation and developing a short-term plan for financial viability. That short-term plan shouldn't go much further than the end of April or mid-May. After that, the plans will need to consider various contingencies. For this reason, the group should include, or regularly invite, the **library director**.

Another immediate task is assessing the stimulus money your library may be able to rely on. For some libraries, this will include the Payroll Protection Plan, and other aid. For others, it may be collaborating with government funders to ensure some portion of government aid will be allotted through your government to your library. Identifying these options is something that group should focus on throughout mid-April.

It is this last area—identifying options and contingency plans-- where the team approach becomes truly valuable. While your Fiscal Team will be assessing your library's needs and the possible ways to obtain those needs, the Team Leader and/or Outreach team will be forging connections with funders to coordinate identified assistance that is needed. Between the team leader and the **Fiscal Team**, it is important to determine who will meet with municipal fiscal authorities on a regular basis (something I encourage, if your library is dependent on a tax levy from a sponsoring municipality).

It is the job of the **Fiscal Team** to provide solid, reliable, and situationally-adjusted financial information and options for the other teams (especially Operations) to work with.

## **#7. Form your board's Operations Team**

A bit of background on this one...

The state of New York has always encouraged local autonomy for libraries. This is a wonderful thing that means wherever you go in New York, there are unique and special libraries waiting to be discovered.

This also means that every library in our state is facing a slightly different situation when it comes to pandemic response. Rural libraries are facing different challenges than urban libraries. Suburban libraries in one county will face different challenges than suburban libraries in the next county over. And this isn't just about location—it's about service. While one library might be a beloved source of donated food, another may be the community's lifeline to certain key services. Another library may be a vital source of senior programming, while in another community, it's the toddlers that will be missing out.

Considering this diversity, there is no one-size-fits-all package for developing a team that considers a library's operations...you are all just too darn unique.

So with that background, what is the role of an **Operations Team** during the crisis response? It considers the critical operations of the library, and develops plans to adopt or carry on those operations during a time of crisis response and—critically--*recovery*.

This starts with an inventory of operations.

For instance, it is the responsibility of the Operations Team to consider the impact of the situation on and **develop solutions for staff** at this time. And while this work must be informed by both the Safety Team and the Fiscal Team, the **Operations Team** is the one that should have the human resources or labor law experience to consider how to continue or adjust the employment terms of the staff at this time period.

Another task will be to review the routine activities of the library, and determine which ones will be suspended and which ones will be adapted and carried forward into the present situation, and how that will be rolled out.

It is important to emphasize that the **Operations Team** will not make these decisions, but rather, informed by the Goal, and with the input of the **director** (just as with any operations planning process), will bring forward well-developed recommendations for the consideration of the full board.

Many of the items the **Operations Team** will consider will have implications for safety. The operations team should do their best to build consideration of safe practices into their recommendations, and only *then* have things reviewed with a fresh eye by the Safety Team.

Operations, because its span will be large, might be the largest team, and for reasons of efficiency, may wish to divide into sub-teams, and will require the most input from the **director**, who may also bring in further input from the staff. One way would be for some members to take the lead on operations during the emergency, while the rest develop ideas about how the library can help during recovery.

### **#8. Designate your board's Crisis Response "Team Leader"**

The purpose of breaking the responsibilities for a crisis response into teams is to allow work to happen with deep focus and great frequency. It is also to ensure that quick, decisive and well-informed action is not bogged down in the inefficiencies of a large group.

That said, a library's board must continue to function as a board, and per the bylaws that govern it.

Pulling all of these considerations together—effective use of teams, adherence to bylaws and policies—is the job of the **Team Leader**.

A natural fit for the **Team Leader** might be your library's board chair. However, if your board chair is a CPA and is best suited to doing the work of leading up the fiscal team, or will be spending the bulk of their time coordinating necessary aid with representatives from municipal government, it is appropriate to consider designating another board member as **Team Leader**.

What does the **Team Leader** do? The **Team Leader** pays attention to what is happening with each and every team, and connects and pulls their work together as needed. They also identify

when matters are ready to be presented before the full board for discussion and a resolution, and ensure the work of the teams is done in healthy cross-collaboration with the work of the **director**.

**This role does not have to be played by the board chair.** *This role should be played by someone who has the capacity to connect regularly and meaningfully with each team, who understands the proper dynamic between a board and paid staff, and who has the skills to identify when a matter is ripe for full board consideration. They should know the bylaws and library policies, and make sure the use of the team structure does not depart from them.*

A good team leader, at this time, also needs to be accessible through phone, e-mail, and video conferencing. If a person can't reach out in multiple ways, they might not be the best person to lead the teams. As with everything else, THIS IS OKAY. Regardless of the role a person plays, it is all part of your fiduciary duty to support the best interests of the library.

(P.S. on that last part: there is nothing wrong with a Team Leader designating an out-of-school child or grandchild as the "Library Crisis Response Team Leader Tech Support," something that would look good on a future college or job application! Just make sure they can take the role of setting up calls and meetings seriously. My 15-year-old has been pressganged into helping with many a meeting.).

## **#9. Designate your board's Public Relations Team**

The impact of this crisis on your library will also have a huge impact on your community. The energy of those who support and are supported by your library (the "stakeholders") need to be channeled to mitigate that impact as much as possible.

How do you harness that energy? Just like your Operations Team, the role of your **PR Team** is going to change depending on the unique situation of your library. However, the overall goal of any **PR Team** is to ensure that the "Goal" of the library, and the things it is doing to achieve that Goal, are articulated to the stakeholders in an *accessible, regular and reliable* way.

For example, if your Goal is:

*"During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, The Library will serve the community, fulfill its mission, and meet the goals of its plan of service by meeting the public's need for reliable information, providing access to critical resources, and serving as a hub of community organization."*

It is the job of the PR Team to get that message out to stakeholders in a way that will be heard. This doesn't mean just repeating the goal everywhere verbatim (a good Goal never sounds very sexy). Rather, it means getting the message out in a way that will be actively observed.

For example, a plain-language way to promote the Goal above would be putting a poster on the front of the library that says *"Our doors are closed but our librarians are here for you! Find us at @@@ or call #####!"* Things like this are the job of the PR team (unless your library is so

vast you have in-house PR, in which case, I doubt your library needs this “Top Ten” list in the first place).

It is also the job of the **PR team** to harvest all the information about how the library is reaching out to the public at this time. That way, when the time comes for budget review and fund-raising, your library will have a solid archive of examples about how it is invaluable. For this reason, consider having a staff member as an advisory member of this team—or even have a staffer perform this function as part of their adjusted job duties.

Because it must be nimble in its messaging, the **PR Team** is the one team that should be empowered to take action without a board vote. The “Crisis Response Team Formation Resolution” presented below takes that into consideration.

### **#10. Be Just Good Enough—and form a Crisis Response Team**

Here are some hard truths:

- There is no perfect way to handle a pandemic response.
- No board will be totally up to this challenge.
- There are things you will fail at.

But by using a Crisis Response Team-informed model, you will set your board up to succeed more than you fail.

If you choose to use this approach, my advice is to not just recycle the formations of your standing committees of the board. Consider the value of shaking things up, inviting “advisory” members, involving the director as needed, and organizing your teams to spur new and novel thinking. Consider carefully who is reaching out to your library system, your council, and your elected leaders.

For a small board, there will by necessity be some overlap in teams. That is fine. **Just be careful to not overload any one person.** This situation will be a marathon, not a sprint.

In the event you determine a crisis response model will be helpful to your library in the coming months and even year ahead, here is a resolution to enact it:

#### **Crisis Response Team Formation Resolution**

**WHEREAS** the current state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic is still in effect as of [DATE OF MEETING]; and

**WHEREAS** the [NAME] library has already had to consider the impact of the state of emergency on the library; and

**WHEREAS** the board anticipates the state of emergency and following recovery period will impact library operations for the remainder of 2020; and

***WHEREAS** the board has determined that the emergency and recovery period will require and enhanced model of leadership to ensure the library emerges from the emergency and recovery period in a manner that best prepares it to serve the needs of the community and fulfill its mission and plan of service;*

***BE IT RESOLVED**, that during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the Goal of the [NAME] Library will serve the community, fulfill its mission, and meet the goals of its plan of service by \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and .  
\_\_\_\_\_;"and*

***BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that the board shall use a "crisis response team" model until it votes that the period of recovery is concluded and such structure is no longer needed; and*

***BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the board's **Crisis Response Team Leader**, responsible for coordinating the work of the different teams and identifying when solutions are ready for board consideration and resolution, shall be NAME, and the designated back-up Team Leader shall be NAME; and*

***BE IT FURTHER** resolved that a **Safety Team** consisting of NAME and NAME shall be responsible for maintaining awareness and raising the issue of safety in all actions related to the board's response to the pandemic emergency and recovery , including the safety and well-being of the community we serve and those the library employs, and shall comment on each recommendation brought to the full board for implementation per the bylaws, prior to any vote; and*

***BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that a **Fiscal Team** consisting of NAME, NAME and NAME, responsible for assessing the financial impact of and financial options available to the library during this time of pandemic emergency and recovery such fiscal response team shall bring recommendations to the full board for implementation per the bylaws; and*

***BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that an **Operations Team** consisting of NAME, NAME and NAME, responsible for assessing the impact on operations and options available to the library, including but not limited to operations related to mission, plan of service, employees, and the role of the library in the community's response to the pandemic, shall bring recommendations to the full board for implementation per the bylaws; and*

***BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that a **Public Relations Team** consisting of NAME and NAME, responsible for creating and effecting accessible, regular, and reliable communications of how the library is meeting the Goal is empowered to send out messages as needed, in the medium deemed appropriate by that Team; and*

***BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the [board or other] may add participants to these groups as authorized by the bylaws; and*

***BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED*** that no team created by this Resolution may take any action or vote that binds the board, and are purely advisory; and

***BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED*** that in no event is any action of this Crisis Response Team Plan to interfere with the ability of the public to have access to meetings and actions of the board; and

***BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED*** that each team shall meet no less than weekly; that the Team Leader shall ensure the full board is advised to meet as needed to implement team recommendations when they are ready; and that all notifications and conduct of such board meetings shall be consistent with the bylaws and the requirements of any current or modified operations of the Open Meetings Law.

That's it. It's a lot, I know. But your library has probably weathered other storms: depressions, wars, local crises. Now is your time to add to that history. In that task, I wish you strength, health, and persistence.