

When Bad Things Happen to Good Organizations: How Effective Managers Prepare for Crisis

Review by **Vincent Hyman, Vincent Hyman Editorial Services**

Despite noble missions and well-intentioned staff, nonprofits are just as prone to crises—both human and natural—as their peers in government and business.

In some ways, we may be even more vulnerable. Many nonprofits are chronically underfunded and understaffed, and many lack the practices, policies, and policy enforcement that can prevent crises, mitigate them when they occur, and speed recovery from them. Moreover, the public generally holds nonprofits to a higher standard of behavior than other organizations. We really feel the pinch when a crisis involves some human failing—neglect, willful misconduct, discrimination, self-dealing. The crisis damages donor good will, and that is everything to a nonprofit.

Starr Mayer's just-released book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good Organizations: How Effective Managers Prepare for Crisis*, is an excellent resource for nonprofit executives, managers, and boards. The 138-page book is a quick read, and it is organized into chapters that can help you prepare before a crisis, recognize signs that a crisis may be looming, cope with a current crisis, or mop up after the event.

The seven chapters cover:

- **The definition and nature of a crisis (chapter 1).** Here, you'll get helpful advice for determining when a situation is just difficult and when it's a true crisis.
- **Ways to prevent crises through policies every nonprofit should have in place (chapter 2).** Policies and their enforcement can be used to prevent crisis. Mayer notes the difficulty smaller nonprofits face in establishing and following policy: "Part of the policy dilemma is that organizations are constantly in motion. Making adjustments to them is like changing a tire on a moving vehicle. Creating a solid body of policies requires intentionality. This book is a plea for that commitment."
- **Preventing crises with people (chapter 3).** Boards, staff, volunteers, and clients are all major sources of risk for nonprofits. Mayer focuses on board and staff. She emphasizes the importance of careful selection of board and staff. She advises addressing key areas of vulnerability on the board, including nepotism, term limits, and conflict of interest. For staff, her salient point is focusing on excellence in hiring, along with good management practices.
- **Understanding precursors to crises (chapter 4).** Though the advice in chapters 2 and 3 is shared by many basic nonprofit texts, the focus in this chapter is more unique. Mayer helps readers separate chronic and acute problems and uncover signs that the present event is likely to morph into a crisis if left untreated. She provides helpful advice on using precursors to crisis to stimulate analysis and improvement of policies and practices that could forestall crisis. The chapter also includes advice for managing conflicts and dealing with bullies on staff, both of which are common in nonprofits and set the stage for full-blown crises.

At a glance

When Bad Things Happen to Good Organizations, by Starr Mayer, guides nonprofit executives, boards, and management through understanding:

- What constitutes a crisis
- How policies and people can prevent crises
- What to do during a crisis
- What to do after a crisis
- How to learn from a crisis to improve future performance

The 138-page book was released in 2011 and is available from Amazon.

- **What to do in a crisis (chapter 5).** Here, readers will benefit from guidance on determining the shape of the crisis. (For example: Will the press be interested? Does it involve money, sex, or child endangerment? Will it involve a lawsuit, affect our credibility). The chapter includes an emergency plan” —a set of “must do” activities during a crisis. This prescriptive list is excellent for the anxious executive director who needs a starting point when a crisis hits.
- **What to do after the crisis (chapters 6 and 7).** The wise organization manages the aftermath through good communications and learns from it through evaluation, assessment of impact on personnel, and determinations about policy changes that will prevent recurrences or reduce the risk of mismanagement when other crises occur. These chapters and the appendix set forth lessons and tools to assist.

The author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good Organizations* is Starr Mayer (www.StarrMayer.com). Mayer is a social worker, mediator, and nonprofit executive whose forty-year career includes work with Habitat for Humanity as its Director of Risk Prevention and Response. Her book was released in March, 2011, and is available directory from Amazon. com. It lists at \$14.95.



Vincent Hyman is an award-winning writer, editor, and publisher. He led the nonprofit publishing center at Amherst H. Wilder Foundation and Fieldstone Alliance, Inc., and now operates Vincent Hyman Editorial Services, with expertise in nonprofit management, foundation effectiveness, policy, marketing, and related issues.



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