

## How can Non-profits Pivot Effectively while Dealing with the COVID-19 Crisis?

- by Roselin Dey

‘The toughest choice to make is between safety and service in these times of crisis’. The CEO of one of the largest non-profit organisations in India said this recently while rolling out their COVID-19 response strategy.

Non-profits specifically working in the development sector are witnessing a deep impact of COVID-19. On one hand, these non-profits are trying to support communities which are struggling with access to resources, health services and sustenance. On the other hand, donor attention and funds are getting diverted towards COVID-19 relief necessitating non-profits to re-evaluate their focus. In such times, non-profits face a difficult choice whether to continue with a constrained business-as-usual path or to pivot and work on community relief/response.

Financial sustainability is one of the primary drivers for this decision and hence having a discussion to build alignment with the strategic donors is the first step. Assuming that the funders are receptive to adapting their existing grants to work on COVID-19 response, non-profits should then see this as an **opportunity to maximise social impact while leveraging core ethos and expertise**.

For organisations pivoting towards COVID-19 response, there are three main areas of focus:

1. **Pivoting the Strategy:** How can non-profits respond to COVID-19 in a way that will help them to ensure resources, funds and interest being channelled effectively?
2. **Pivoting Operations:** How can non-profits leverage organisational strengths for responding to COVID-19? How can non-profits set up governance systems to ensure constant recalibration?
3. **Execution:** How can non-profits ensure that teams continue to feel valued and motivated to execute the response strategy?

Over the last few weeks, we have had the opportunity to work deeply with one such non-profit to support and co-create their response to COVID-19 crisis. Within a matter of two weeks, this non-profit has completely pivoted its work from education towards COVID-19 response by leveraging its 500+ strong cross functional team to focus on marginalised communities across eight Indian States. Engaging closely with such a deeply committed organisation and its multiple stakeholders have helped us reflect on some learnings that can be used by non-profits while coping with the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Pivoting Programme Strategy: Find the right North Star for your COVID-19 Response**

While it is more straightforward to extend situational relief support to those impacted by COVID-19, it is surprisingly difficult to create a response approach that can leverage the core

expertise of an organisation. A north star helps define a singular purpose and mission for the entire organisation. Hence finding a North Star for COVID-19 response enables a non-profit to **anchorage its own strength, identify clear demonstrable areas of impact and channelise/attract the right kind of funds and partnerships towards the mission.**

While trying to identify the COVID-19 Response North Star, it would be helpful for Non-profits to reflect on:

- What is the best way to identify this North Star - discussion with stakeholders, funders, community members?
- In this fast-evolving crisis how can our decision be data driven to ensure we are solving the right problem?
- Can we leverage our current work, resources and relationships for this North Star?
- How can we make the North Star ambitious yet achievable?
- How can we create a results framework for the team to regularly reflect on the impact we are driving?

Our partner organisation is deeply entrenched in the communities in the geographies they operate and hence their COVID-19 response strategy was created keeping the community in the centre. *Their North Star is to save the lives of one of the most vulnerable segments in the communities through a completely virtual working model.* And they are doing this by leveraging their deep established connections with the community members, other non-profits and local government in those geographies.

By narrowing down on this single North Star, we were able to identify specific outcomes for the organisation and also identify key success indicators for the interventions. This specificity was extremely beneficial for ensuring team support, alignment with partners and engagement with donors.

#### **Pivoting Operations: Personalise roles that teams would play**

Non-profits working in the development sector already have teams which are empathetic and mission driven. Hence, rallying team support for responding to COVID-19 19 is not a big challenge. However, **ensuring focus and effectiveness in a completely virtual working model is the hardest** - especially when teams are used to driving on-ground action. For the response strategy to be effective, it is critical to ensure that **all teams are aligned to the North Star and know how to leverage personal strengths.**

While trying to create a north star centric operationalisation strategy, it would be helpful for Non-profits to reflect on:

- What resources do we need and how can we leverage the strengths of existing teams?
- How can we break barriers and enable creation of quick cross functional teams?

- Who should be the Champions within these teams who can identify strongly with the crisis and would be willing to take up more responsibility?
- What is the ethos and strength of each team and how can they drive meaning in their work while responding to COVID-19?
- What are the areas that we need to build as strengths to effectively achieve this North Star metric?

With the partner organisation, we supported the **creation of a Hub and Spoke model of multiple functional groups for COVID-19 Response basis their areas of expertise**. Cross functional teams that were creating pedagogical content earlier were restructured into a singular Content Functional Group for their expertise in creating preventive behavioural change content. Teams with expertise in communications were roped in as a Communications Functional Group to create a campaign-based approach to action. And many other similar functional groups were created for problem solving. A sub-group and intra-group cadence was set up for ensuring seamless communication. **Most importantly we created a central strategy group that acted as a Hub** and held the entire response action together for timely action and direction.

#### **Execution: Prioritise needs of the team while channelling their energy**

Building ownership for rolling out a COVID-19 response strategy is not as simple as appointing a SPOC and expecting results in these times. Especially in these times of crisis, employees are close to burnout and want to feel valued and safe both physically and mentally. Building ownership towards the response strategy would *need active engagement with employees on a regular basis through the right channels at the right time*. **It would mean changing the entire narrative of communication to be one of service and volunteering for crisis**. It would mean also *ensuring each team member acts responsibly in his own sphere of influence*.

While trying to build ownership in team members, it would be helpful for Non-profits to reflect on:

- How could the crisis being faced be communicated transparently to the team members?
- How can leaders be empathetic to the team during strategy rollout?
- What would be the key message that would help teams join the quest?
- What measures should be put in place to ensure that safety and wellness is prioritised?

With our partner organisation, we spent a lot of time on planning the change management process. Most of all, the communication and messaging was focused on responsible leadership from each team member - to empower them. A number of organisation-wide mechanisms were also put in place. Skip level communication was made non-negotiable for rollout to ensure right messaging and fervour. Mental wellness resources were made

available to the team members. Daily 1-1 check-ins with reportees was made mandatory as well.

### **Embrace partnerships with likely as well as unlikely allies**

Over the last few weeks, Sattva has been closely tracking the COVID-19 status and supporting ecosystem initiatives to create a publicly accessible data repository (<https://www.indiadatainsights.com/free-interact/covid-19-global-efforts/>). We can clearly see multiple ecosystem wide collaboratives as well as inter-organisational partnerships emerge. **Non-profits can use this time also as an opportunity to build and strengthen relationships with both likely and unlikely allies in the ecosystem.** While none of us know what is yet to come, this is an opportunity to unite efforts and maybe, just maybe, we will emerge stronger.

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*Sattva has been working with various non-profits and social organisations as well as corporate clients to help them define their social impact goals. Our focus is to solve critical problems and find scalable solutions. We assist organisations in formulating their long-term social impact strategy by strategically aligning with business to provide meaningful solutions to social issues.*

*We'd love to hear your thoughts and feedback on this topic. Do write to us: [impact@sattva.co.in](mailto:impact@sattva.co.in)*