

How to Build Nonprofit Resilience

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The Climate
Reality Project®
AREA CHAPTER

Collaborating to accelerate
social impact

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Cover: Prior to the pandemic, the Bay Area chapter of The Climate Reality Project—one of the nonprofits featured in this collection—participated in the “Rise for Climate” march in San Francisco. (Photo: Kim Lyell)

Introduction

A life-destroying global pandemic. Anguished demands for racial and social justice. Millions of families in financial freefall. Whiplash change across the social sector and with it, unpredictable funding flows.

These cascading challenges are testing the design limits of nonprofits everywhere, often exposing a constricted capacity to bounce back and help communities build toward a better tomorrow. It's more clear than ever that nonprofits need to possess a well-honed process for continuously building and reinforcing organizational resilience. But how?

How can nonprofits summon the creativity to pioneer new pathways to social impact, when deep crisis has shaken their fundamental approaches to achieving their goals? What can nonprofits do to navigate uncertainty, so they have a better shot at seizing new opportunities to extend their reach—opportunities that the pandemic itself has revealed? And what does it look like when nonprofits are capable of continual, trauma-free renewal, even in the absence of a crisis?

Such questions were top-of-mind in the summer of 2020, as the US surpassed 3 million COVID-19 infections and cries for racial justice persisted in cities across the country, after police officers fatally shot Breonna Taylor in March and choked George Floyd to death in May. That summer, The Bridgespan Group and the Emerson Collective embarked on a year-long effort to support 48 nonprofits in the Emerson Collective's portfolio as they fortified their organizational resilience.

While these nonprofits operate within a variety of fields that span the social sector, each organization is working to advance racial equity and justice. And like so many other nonprofits, each plays a critical role in partnering with communities as they strive to make their way through these unprecedented times. "We have always been humbled by the strength and resilience of our partners," said Anne Marie Burgoyne, the Emerson Collective's director of social innovation. "But as 2020 unfolded and leaders and teams were challenged on so many fronts—financial, operational, and relational—we sought to create an opportunity to build skills and tools to enable organizations to grow even stronger."

As we work and learn alongside these nonprofits, we are reminded that resilience—the capacity to not only navigate difficult challenges or traumatic events, but also improve along the way—resides within each of us. Citing research as well as such examples as the run-to-the-fire response of multitudes of Americans to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the American Psychological Association asserts that "resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary." All people experience trauma, pain, and stress in their lives and yet, all of us have the capacity to grow our inner resilience over time.

So it goes with organizations. All organizations, especially social sector nonprofits, likely endure the kind of adversity that sometimes shakes them to their foundations; all have the potential to withstand and learn from those difficult events. So it behooves nonprofits to make the practice of building organizational resilience an everyday habit, so they not only survive the current crisis, but also emerge from it stronger and better poised to meet the needs of the communities they serve.

Three Strategies for Building Nonprofit Resilience

In this three-part series, we draw on the experiences of a variety of nonprofits and their leaders—many of whom have sacrificed and struggled in their personal as well as professional lives—to explore **three core strategies for building resilience and ensuring that it persists**. Even though we spotlight nonprofits that largely operate within the United States, the lessons and insights that follow are universal. Any nonprofit anywhere can apply them.

1. **They think long and short:** Resilient organizations craft and maintain an inspiring vision for a 10-year future, even as they create a roadmap for navigating their next 18 months, so that difficult, sudden events don't deter them from achieving long-term, outsized goals. (Read "[To Combat Adversity, Resilient Nonprofits Think Long and Short.](#)")
2. **They tap into their superpower:** They identify, marshal, and deploy the unique assets and capabilities that make them distinctly impactful in the communities they serve. (Read "[In a Crisis, Resilient Nonprofits Tap into Their Superpower.](#)")
3. **They know that even in a crisis, there are opportunities to accomplish more:** They get clear-eyed about the risks they might encounter. At the same time, they experiment relentlessly and elevate what works. By generating an exciting array of strategic options, they just might be nimble enough to seize emerging opportunities in a fast-changing world. (Read "[For Resilient Nonprofits, There Is Opportunity in Adversity.](#)")

Every disappointment and loss holds the possibility of new beginnings. As Frederick Douglass put it, "If there is no struggle, there is no progress." And yet, it's not simply grit and persistence that enables people and teams to bounce back from setbacks smarter and stronger. In "[How to Build a More Resilient Team,](#)" author and consultant Gustavo Razetti argues there's another factor: the capacity to reframe difficult challenges as opportunities for new ways of seeing and learning. Even in the depths of deep suffering, there is always the possibility to overcome—and we must seek out hard-won insights and strategies to do so.

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To Combat Adversity, Resilient Nonprofits Think Long and Short

One day during the summer of 2020, a team of staffers at MacDowell, the nation's first artist residency program, met via Zoom with an ambitious agenda: begin to build a strategic playbook that would identify tangible steps to help the nonprofit amp up its resilience, even as it was battling a globe-spanning, existential threat to its future.

Since its founding in 1907, MacDowell has provided a space for artists working in multiple disciplines—Leonard Bernstein and James Baldwin; Zoe Leonard, Alice Walker, and Ta-Nehisi Coates—as they created works that nourish and challenge the world. But when the COVID-19 pandemic commenced its virulent spread, MacDowell, like so many other nonprofits, was forced to shutter its studios and suspend its in-person programs. At the very moment when people needed the sustenance of art more than ever, MacDowell's future seemed never more clouded.

Against that dispiriting backdrop, the MacDowell team began to wrestle with a strategy for building organizational resilience: to “think long.” The animating idea was to set their sights on a far-off, lofty vision for where MacDowell might aim to land by the end of the decade. A vision that would fuel an enlarged sense of purpose and inspire contributions from everyone.

Trouble was, the pandemic had leached a sense of possibility out of more than a few

team members. So, too, had the horrific events of March and May, when the police fatally shot Breonna Taylor and choked George Floyd to death. For some, the future seemed frightening or at the very least, deeply demoralizing. Commented one team member, “Ten years from now, I can't imagine how anything could be good.”

“MacDowell has one foot in the early 21st century, and it's trying to find its footing in the future.”

PHILIP HIMBERG, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MACDOWELL

MacDowell had already begun to examine its role in participating in systems of inequity, which led its executive director, Philip Himberg, to think that staffers would most likely share a common vision for its next 10 years. But that was not the case. “I thought we would all be on the same page,” Himberg recalled. “It was a real surprise that that [effort] created some dissension among our MacDowell staff and board, or at least it raised a lot of emotions.”

And yet, the conversation around equity and MacDowell's 10-year vision created space for the organization to reflect on the “suffering of so many, many human beings,” added Himberg, as well as the fact that “the social justice movement has changed everything. That change is urgent, necessary, and it will happen.

“MacDowell has one foot in the early 21st century,” he continued, “and it’s trying to find its footing in the future.”

To help people imagine how the organization might shift from what it was to what it might be, MacDowell Database Manager Jenni Wu, who was facilitating the meeting, pivoted to an affirmative, almost utopian framing. She asked the group to imagine that after 10 years, MacDowell was wildly successful. What would the world look like if MacDowell no longer needed to exist?

After a long pause, a couple of people volunteered some answers. “Ten years from now, we’d have a social safety net that would protect artists from running the risk of getting sick and being kicked off their health insurance,” offered one staffer. Said another: “There would be a real rebalancing of who has power and presence in our society. Artists would have a seat at the table of our democracy, and they would be involved in conversations about how our society serves other people.”

With that, other people chimed in with their own conceptions of a compelling future that would spark associates to give their best, even when the outlook seemed bleak. “After they spoke, there was this lighting up across the rest of the group,” Wu recalled. “We all got really excited about this vision.”

From Thinking Long to Thinking Short

For nonprofits seeking to build their resilience, thinking long is essentially a judo move, where they adjust and respond to what’s thrown at them by turning a stronger opponent—spirit-sapping adversity—into bigger and bolder opportunities to accelerate social impact. Of course, imagining an audaciously aspirational vision of the future doesn’t mean they will achieve it.

Nevertheless, by setting their sights on a far-off point on the horizon, nonprofits can increase the odds that they will navigate around the inevitable obstacles and make



MacDowell Fellows join for dinner on the first day of summer in 2017. (Photo: Dan Millbauer)

real progress toward realizing their boldest ambitions.

And yet, thinking long, by itself, is not enough. After identifying their most aspirational 10-year goals, it behooves nonprofits to “think short,” by tightening their focus and mapping out where they want to land within the next 12 to 18 months. They do this by identifying key areas of work that catalyze impact—that is, core programs they should continue to grow, work they should evolve, and new areas of work they should pursue.

For example, as a result of amplifying equity in its 10-year vision, MacDowell is currently developing new ways of engaging with artists who, for economic, cultural, social, and access-related reasons, might not have considered applying to the residency program in the past. The impetus was the “Virtual MacDowell” residency with eight artists, held this past August, which marked the first time in the organization’s century-plus history that it conducted a residency via Zoom sessions, replete with virtual meals and online studio tours.

One thing worth noting: There’s nothing magical about 18 months. It could just as well be a 12-month timeline. Thinking short is about teams looking far enough out to anchor their planning and achieve strategic clarity, but not so far afield that they lose focus. For MacDowell, the time horizon was 18 months, but for others it could be more or less.

To be sure, thinking long and short—setting your sights on the stars while simultaneously battling multiple crises on the ground—is no easy thing. It is far simpler to make either/or choices: either plan for tomorrow or take up the pressing challenges of today. But adversity demands

that resilient organizations push past the binary limits of either/or and achieve a synthesis, by reaping the advantages of long-term visioning while advancing toward the organization’s more immediate, shorter-term impact goals.

The Long and the Short: New Door Ventures

Another nonprofit that is working toward a synthesis of long and short thinking is the San Francisco Bay Area’s New Door Ventures. The nonprofit supports “opportunity youth”—young people who are out of work or school—as they build pathways to sustainable careers. Many have dealt with adversities like homelessness and substance abuse, which mask the fact that they have the talent and grit to succeed—if only they get the chance. New Door provides them with professional training, followed by three months of interning at Bay Area businesses.

Like MacDowell, New Door also found it challenging to conceive and align around a vision for the future. In New Door’s case, there were so many things the organization wanted to do, it was difficult to home in on what it *must* do.

“If you think about 10 years out, you know, the sky is the limit,” commented Omar Butler, the nonprofit’s CEO. At the same time, New Door’s staff was struggling to bridge a digital divide that had expanded to a super-sized chasm, due to the pandemic. How do you deliver digital classes on resume writing and networking to students who have only a cell phone? How do you replicate over videoconference the real-world experience of working at a grocery store? Those vexing challenges sometimes made it doubly difficult to focus on a far-off future.



Young people participate in a New Door Ventures workshop prior to the pandemic. (Photo: Heather Rudow)

Nevertheless, New Door persisted. Thinking long pushed the organization to take a hard look at its fundamental approach to supporting opportunity youth. By one measure, the nonprofit's strategy has yielded impressive results: six months after completing their internships, 86 percent of the organization's alums are employed, are attending school, or are doing both.

And yet, New Door concluded that what it's doing today is not enough to prepare young people for the challenges of tomorrow, given what it takes to achieve a middle-class standard of living in the Bay Area. "We're going to have to change our [theory of change](#)," said Butler. That means lifting the organization's aspirations and metrics of success for its young clients, so they acquire not only the skills to achieve a middle-class income, but also the health, housing, and other outcomes that comprise a middle-class life.

Having begun to establish a longer term, more holistic vision of the impact it wants to achieve in the world, New Door then

pivoted to thinking short, "which allowed us to operate much more intentionally," added Butler. That meant identifying shorter-term goals for accelerating impact, mapping out next steps for achieving them, putting benchmarks across the next four quarters, and determining who will be responsible for what.

Over the next year, New Door aims to drive impact by building out its core work—specifically, expanding its curriculum beyond three months, evolving its capacity for digital learning, and pursuing new areas of work, such as embarking on advocacy efforts, so young people who have endured systemic racism and been denied access to spaces of wealth and privilege have an equal opportunity to advance. If, by the end of 12 to 18 months, New Door has made real progress across those initiatives, it will have taken a big step toward realizing its far-off ambition, where Bay Area opportunity youth have the skills and the access to achieve a middle-class life by middle age.

By taking a “both/and” approach to thinking long as well as short, New Door is discovering that progress is possible, even with a virus stalking the world’s human population. “In the midst of uncertainty, there are opportunities,” Butler concluded. “We don’t have to remain overly cautious and stand still.”

Some Takeaways

No matter what the future holds, the experiences of MacDowell, New Door, and other nonprofits we have worked with offer some potentially helpful insights for building resilience by thinking long and short.

Develop a set of guiding principles, animated by your organization’s mission and values, to map a path into the future. Your organization’s values need not be confined to your annual report or a landing page on your website. They can help define a set of signposts that point toward your ultimate vision and guide you to your organization’s destination over the next 12 to 18 months. In the darkness of a crisis, a value such as “We put people first” can be a powerful beacon for prioritizing the protection of people’s jobs. Similarly, when imagining programs that are fit for a challenging future, “We elevate equity” becomes an imperative for putting Black, brown, and Indigenous people at the forefront.

Be bold. Encouraging teams to imagine an audacious vision for the future helps to build an enlarged sense of purpose that merits extra effort. Aligning around a bold mission can bind people to a renewed sense of purpose; it just might inspire them to tackle problems that are as important as they are seemingly intractable. Key questions to consider: What would it look like if

“In the midst of uncertainty, there are opportunities. We don’t have to remain overly cautious and stand still.”

OMAR BUTLER, CEO, NEW DOOR VENTURES

we were wildly successful at solving what matters most? What would it look like if there was no longer a need for us to exist? What would it mean if our community was healed and thriving?

Apply the “but for” test. To be sure, imagining an optimistic future in the midst of a debilitating crisis is always challenging. Recall how the MacDowell team was initially reluctant to take on the task, as many felt the future was dark, depressing, even scary. However, when the moderator reframed the task, she opened up a world of possibilities. She posed this question: If our vision for our community came true, *but for* our organization, what would have happened? What is the unique, critical role we can play in realizing that future?

Allow systems change thinking to emerge. When an organization thinks beyond its current programs and pursues timelines that are longer than a few years, almost inevitably, idea paths to systems change begin to emerge. The paths might lead organizations—even those anchored in direct services—to deeper advocacy, policy, or culture change work. For example, when MacDowell gave itself permission to talk about what a better world for creatives might look like, an intriguing opportunity emerged: imagine a social safety net for artists.

Perfection not required. It’s okay if your 10-year vision is a little messy and scattered. The point of the exercise is to break

out of the constraints of today and spark fresh thinking about how you want your future to unfold. And then, sharpen the focus, by mapping out specific impact goals over the next 12 to 18 months. Essentially, you're building a runway to achieve lift-off. To do this, you might ask: What would let us know that we're on a path to achieving that generational difference that we seek for the future? What impact are we having, and with whom? What are our priority areas for learning and for action?

Two final thoughts: First, if your team wants to dig deeper into mapping out an ambitious future while simultaneously making dramatic progress toward your

12-to-18-month goals, [click here](#) for a brief primer on starting that conversation.

Second: By no means is any of the above a blueprint for thinking long and short. Our intent is to simply offer a few real-world ideas for guiding your efforts, not for leading them. When it comes to building organizational resilience, each of us must chart our own path, according to the challenges we encounter and the possibilities that await. As James Baldwin put it, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

How to Begin Thinking Long and Short

A core strategy for building organizational resiliency, as we assert in the article “[To Combat Adversity, Resilient Nonprofits Think Long and Short](#),” is to think long-term as well as short-term. That is, nonprofits surface and align around a 10-year vision—a purpose-driven ambition that is big enough and bold enough to push team members to look beyond the realm of what is possible today. At the same time, they home in on 12- to 18-month goals that will take them another step closer to realizing the changes they seek in the world.

Thinking both long and short can be powerful, whether your organization is confronting a crisis, significant volatility, or just everyday uncertainty. If you want to start, consider the power of intentional discussion. Gather your senior team and commit to having a series of conversations focused on your organization’s overriding destination. Try to schedule at least 60 to 90 minutes, and resist letting day-to-day business tasks crowd out this important conversation.

Here are some questions to get your team started. Share them in advance so that team members have time to reflect:

Our long-term vision for impact:

In 10 years, what would our clients or our community—with its myriad members and stakeholders—look like if they were truly healthy and thriving?

If our vision for our community came true, *but for* our organization, what would have happened? What is the unique, critical role we can play in realizing that future?

Our short-term vision for impact: If we are on a journey toward that future...

What part of our core work should grow?

What might need to evolve or change?

What new areas of work should we pursue?

What might we need to stop doing, even if it feels hard or scary?

Sample Q&A for Thinking Long and Short

Here's how one workforce development organization thought about its **10-year vision**:

In 10 years, what would it look like if our clients were truly healthy and thriving?

- Our clients—and especially our Black and Latinx clients—are in stable, life-sustaining jobs. All major employers in our region have implemented new policies (including health and benefit packages) to support entry-level workers.

If our vision for our community came true, *but for our organization*, what would have happened? What is the unique, critical role we can play in realizing that future?

- We are a one-stop shop for clients to receive high-quality, compassionate training for living-wage jobs, in addition to relevant wrap-around supports (e.g., referrals for housing assistance; social services). We are the local, go-to trusted source for employers who are looking for workforce pipelines and technical assistance related to how to support and retain these employees.

Here is how the same organization synthesized the discussion of key questions about its **18-month destination**:

If we are on a journey toward that future...

What part of our core work should we continue to grow?

- Maintain strong relationships with our employer partners
- Grow our advocacy for workplace practices and policies that specifically benefit people of color
- Advance our partnerships with employers in stable and growing industries

What are we doing today that we should evolve?

- Pivot our skills training to focus on growing industries; continue to shift to an online delivery model
- Add mental health supports to our training

What new areas of work should we pursue?

- Basic financial coaching for clients and financial assistance referral partnerships, to help our clients access financial assistance resources and improve their financial literacy

In a Crisis, Resilient Nonprofits Tap into Their Superpower

All throughout the COVID-19 pandemic's reign, with the unfathomable loss of life as well as the grinding struggle to battle back racism and advance equity, front-line nonprofits have had to reorient and respond to the extraordinary suffering across their communities, even as others confronted such existential threats as climate change. But what of the nonprofits themselves? How can they summon the resilience to serve so many in such deep need, when the world around them is so unstable and often unknowable?

When a crisis sets in and fear looms large, it can hobble people's confidence and chip away at their sense of agency. However, any nonprofit that is making progress against its goals possesses an inner superpower—that special something that makes the organization what it is and enables it to achieve its maximum impact. A superpower could be a resource or a capability, a mindset or an approach. Whatever form it might take, a superpower animates a nonprofit. It helps the nonprofit stand out among its peers. And it's a force for multiplying impact, enabling the nonprofit to achieve the most that it can for those whom it serves.

A superpower is fully expressed through an organization's programs, services, or culture. Perhaps the nonprofit excels at bringing groups with different agendas together, such as community members, business leaders, and government officials. Or it's renowned for harnessing technical expertise.

By putting these unique assets to work, organizations increase the odds that they will not only endure adversity, they might also discover new opportunities to advance, despite all the obstacles. In fact, marshalling those critical assets that comprise a superpower is vital even in the *absence* of a crisis, given that it is incumbent on nonprofits to adapt as the world around them changes.

Defining a Superpower

So what specifically *is* a superpower? Consider a young nonprofit named [ImmSchools](#). Co-founded in 2018 by three formerly undocumented women who migrated to the United States as children, ImmSchools partners with K-12 schools to create safe and supportive learning environments for undocumented students.

ImmSchools' superpower is the empathy the organization and its leaders have for their clients. The superpower consists of the nonprofit's capacity to deeply identify with the struggles, breakthroughs, and life experiences of undocumented young people and their families. "We are a 100 percent, immigrant-led organization," said ImmSchools' co-founder and CEO, Viridiana Carrizales. "It is the foundation of what we are as an organization." That fact has helped ImmSchools build an unshakeable bond of trust with its clients, intuit their needs, and quickly respond to the community's challenges.

ImmSchools' co-founders—who also include Chief Program Officer Vanessa Luna and



ImmSchools' Leadership team: Co-founder and Chief Strategy Officer Lorena Tule-Romain (left), Co-founder and Chief Program Officer Vanessa Luna (center), and Co-founder, CEO, and Board President Viridiana Carrizales (right). (Photo: ImmSchools)

Chief Strategy Officer Lorena Tule-Romain—endured many of the same searing experiences as their clients, including the gnawing worry that they could be swept up by ICE or lose a family member to deportation. Carrizales recalled that at age 16, she confessed to her high school guidance counsellor that she was undocumented and lacked a Social Security card. The counsellor immediately called ICE on her.

At the same time, Carrizales, Luna, and Tule-Romain also frequently witnessed the strength and courage of parents in their community—their determination to work through the pain of leaving their home countries and their success in building entrepreneurial lives in this country. They saw community members advocate for their children's education and tap into their own power when, for example, exercising their rights during a traffic stop.

These experiences, both painful and inspirational, have shaped the way the co-founders approach their work at ImmSchools every day. “Growing up undocumented in this country has built resiliency in ourselves,” said Carrizales. “We are now using

some of those same strategies as an organization, to make sure we can not only survive this crisis, but come out of it even stronger.”

A crisis often clarifies a superpower, which was certainly true of ImmSchools during the spring of 2020. Back then, as the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered schools and forced businesses to lock down, the pain

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CEO AND BOARD PRESIDENT, IMMSCHOOLS

was especially acute across the roughly 11 million undocumented residents in the United States. Many worked in child care and other jobs that the coronavirus obliterated, since families had to self-isolate to safeguard their health. And yet, when federal lawmakers responded to the economy's downward spiral with a \$2 trillion stimulus package, the relief excluded millions of undocumented immigrants who lacked Social Security numbers but still paid federal taxes.

With job losses mounting across these communities and families struggling to pay for food, housing, and other life essentials, ImmSchools' leaders recognized that they had a responsibility to support families and students in their programs against the pandemic's predations. But they were educators, not relief workers.

However, ImmSchools' superpower—its deep empathy—allowed its leaders to develop a community-informed solution that the organization had not previously tried: a relief fund for families.

Within a matter of weeks, ImmSchools raised \$200,000, creating an emergency response fund that provided direct financial assistance to imperiled families—something the co-founders had discussed previously, but they had never moved from contemplation to action. The pandemic's devastation made it an urgent imperative: ImmSchools had to tap into its superpower, its core value of empathy, to go beyond the organization's perceived limitations and provide for its community in a time of great need.

"This is the very essence of what it means to be an immigrant," said Carrizales. "We create and build even in instances when nothing seems possible."

Carrizales and the ImmSchools' team nurtured empathy for their clients, not only because of their deep personal experience, but also through a commitment to hear, understand, and stand shoulder to shoulder with students and families in their community. Empathy, like most other nonprofit superpowers, is not a fixed trait. It is built over time, brick by brick.

Putting a Superpower to Work

The pressures of a crisis can push a nonprofit to clarify its superpower. Once defined, a superpower helps propel a nonprofit into the future—and stand a better chance of surmounting whatever obstacles might arise. That's because the very act of planning for the future and mapping the

next steps for achieving it is another critical part of building organizational resilience.

As we outlined in the article, "[To Combat Adversity, Resilient Nonprofits Think Long and Short](#)," nonprofits bring their sense of agency to life when they give themselves the space to "think long." That is, they set their sights on a bold, 10-year vision of how they might dramatically advance their impact. They then tighten their focus and "think short," by mapping out what they need to accomplish over the next 12 to 18 months, so they can take a big first step toward realizing their loftiest ambition. They do that by harnessing their superpower, the catalyst that helps them achieve their short-term goals and long-term vision.

What does it look like when a nonprofit channels its superpower toward catalytic impact?

One answer can be found in the experiences of [The Climate Reality Project](#). Led by former US Vice President Al Gore, and CEO and President Ken Berlin, Climate Reality's bold ambition is to spur actions that dramatically cut greenhouse gas emissions by as much as 60 percent by 2030 and ultimately help free the planet from the chokehold of fossil fuels.

Climate Reality's superpower consists of its ability to reimagine design solutions for surmounting big challenges. The organization's design solution for climate change was to help mobilize a mass movement of climate activists. Over the years, Climate Reality designed an ongoing series of three-day, in-person events that brought hundreds of activists together. The organization's workshops equipped attendees with the tools, knowledge, and networks to return to their communities and organize the fight for a just and



Climate Reality Project members attend a Memphis Community Against the Pipeline rally. (Photo: Leo Arnoult)

equitable clean economy. By the end of 2020, the nonprofit had enlisted more than 31,000 “Climate Reality Leaders” in the globe-spanning effort to combat climate change.

However, 2020 was no ordinary year for adding more activists to Climate Reality’s ranks. Climate Reality had planned on-the-ground trainings in five US cities, with approximately 1,500 people attending each. But that spring, with the pandemic’s remorseless reach making large-scale, in-person gatherings potential super-spreader events, change was forced upon the organization. Climate Reality had to figure out how to deliver its workshops virtually, within a matter of weeks.

“Suddenly, our people had to work very, very hard on something completely new,” Berlin recalled. “Everything required rethinking.”

The shift meant that Climate Reality had to stretch a three-day event across a week-long virtual training, so people could absorb the learnings in a Zoom environment. It

meant cataloging all the myriad details that comprise a large event and recasting them in Zoom, in a way that would still keep attendees engaged. It meant that once one mass virtual event was completed, the staff had to debrief, regroup, and immediately innovate on the next one, even as they dealt with COVID-19’s impact on their personal lives and the lives of family members.

“It was six months of just full-force effort,” recalled Vanessa LaVallee, the nonprofit’s senior vice president for Operations and Advancement.

Climate Reality achieved all of that by harnessing its superpower—its agile approach to program design. Over the years, its staff learned not only to rapidly prototype, but also to work seamlessly together. Although the organization had other choices when the pandemic hit, such as cancelling its live events or dramatically scaling them back (which in the heat of the moment, might have seemed like the best option), the nonprofit’s superpower enabled it to put all its design skills to bear and pivot to an option that was as outsized as it was untested.

By leaning into designing an all-virtual program, Climate Reality dramatically shifted from the way it had worked to the way it probably should. By the fall of 2020, the nonprofit succeeded in virtually training 9,700 grassroots activists, significantly more than it originally planned for. By proving it can train more people virtually and also reap climate benefits, “it’s put us in a whole new environment for how we do this work,” said LaVallee. “Now we’ve got to figure out, how do we as an organization expand fast enough?”

Regardless of how Climate Reality answers that question, it has already demonstrated that despite the pandemic’s constraints,

the nonprofit's superpower has enabled it to accomplish far more than it previously imagined, and thereby take a big step toward its 10-year goal. In this way, the organization underlined a core feature of organizational resilience: the capacity to not only work through difficult challenges, but also embrace change and improve along the way.

"We often say that change takes much longer to happen than you think it will," said Berlin. "And then it happens faster than you thought it would."

Some Takeaways

So what can we learn from ImmSchools, the Climate Reality Project, and other nonprofits that have sought to make themselves resilient by harnessing their superpowers?

Start by defining. A superpower might sometimes be hard to pin down. It is not necessarily your blue-chip programs, the star-power of your CEO, or the sheen of your brand. So before you attempt to tap into it, first agree on what it is. What's the DNA that enables your organization—and all of your staff—to play a catalytic role in achieving your long-term vision? What would entice stakeholders to come to your organization versus another? What do people rave about when they recount what you helped them accomplish? Answering those questions will help you surface the deeper knowledge and capabilities that make your nonprofit distinctly impactful in the world.

Use your superpower to pressure test your organization's long-term vision. A core strategy for building resilience is to identify

“Suddenly, our people had to work very, very hard on something completely new. Everything required rethinking.”

KEN BERLIN, CEO AND PRESIDENT, THE CLIMATE REALITY PROJECT

a bold, 10-year vision for your nonprofit. A vision that marks a point on the horizon to navigate to; a vision that inspires contributions from everyone. Having defined your superpower, you can now use it to test whether you're headed in the right direction. Ask whether your organization's unique assets can really help you land your organization in that unfolding future. If there is any doubt, take some time to reorient toward a vision that aligns with your unique capabilities.

Aim your superpower toward your organization's ultimate destination. Once clear on what makes your organization uniquely impactful, step back and think about how to use those assets to propel you toward your long-term destination. This is an opportunity to untether yourselves from your day-to-day work and unpack exactly how your superpower can get you from where you are to where you need to go. What does that unleash for your team? If you fully utilized your superpower, what new opportunities would open up—for example, opportunities to innovate on existing programs or craft new approaches or ways of working?

One final thought: If your team wants to dig deeper into defining and harnessing your superpower, you can download the brief primer for starting that conversation: "[How to Put Your Organization's Superpower to Work.](#)"

How to Put Your Organization's Superpower to Work

As we assert in the article “[In a Crisis, Resilient Nonprofits Tap into Their Superpower](#),” every successful nonprofit has that special something—a unique mindset, capability, or asset—that sets it apart and helps advance its impact in the world. In other words, a superpower.

When a nonprofit summons its superpower, it stands a better chance of pushing through adversity and even seizing new opportunities that a crisis might reveal. Moreover, a superpower can help pressure test whether the organization has correctly identified its [ten-year vision](#)—another key part of building organizational resilience. After all, an organization's unique capability is what will propel it toward its long-term destination. When the superpower is aligned with the organization's bold, far-off vision, the organization increases the odds that it will achieve it.

If you want to define your nonprofit's superpower and put it to work, gather your team and carve out 60-to-90 minutes to have that discussion, without outside interruptions. Your team might work through the five questions below, which aim to get the conversation going. Share the questions in advance of the meeting, so team members have time to reflect.

Defining your superpower

When we describe our organization to someone who doesn't know us very well, what do we emphasize that's distinctive about who we are and what we do?

Alternatively, you could ask: What would lead someone outside of our organization (a client, a funder, a partner, a prospective hire) to fund, engage, or work for us, instead of some other organization?

Also consider the following potential categories for where you may have unique assets. Pick 1-2 *critical* assets across categories that you think are particularly distinctive:

- a. Programs and approaches
- b. Knowledge, IP, and expertise
- c. Talent and leadership
- d. Relationships
- e. Other?

Using your superpower to pressure-test your organization's long-term goals

Keeping your superpower in mind, reflect on your organization's impact goals. Does your superpower align with those goals? Should you revise them? Make them more ambitious?

Harnessing your superpower

Given your (existing or revised) impact goals, how can you use your superpower to greatest effect? What are 1-2 things you can do to more fully utilize your strongest assets?

For Resilient Nonprofits, There Is Opportunity in Adversity

In 1960, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. published an [essay](#) in which he acknowledged the “suffering, frustration, and agonizing moments [that] I have had to undergo occasionally as a result of my involvement in a difficult struggle.” But he also voiced a sense of cautious optimism—a sense that “every crisis has both its dangers and its opportunities.” More than 60 years later, all throughout this past, most tumultuous year, we have seen many nonprofit organizations lean into King’s belief that even in the midst of great darkness, often there are bright opportunities to accomplish more.

Now more than ever, nonprofits face a more volatile and unpredictable environment. However, through The Bridgespan Group’s work (in partnership with the [Emerson Collective](#)) supporting four dozen nonprofits in the Emerson Collective’s portfolio, we have had a close-up view as these leadership teams navigated the pandemic and the ongoing fight for equity and justice, even as they pursued new ways of working; new pathways for evolving their programs; and new strategies for supporting more constituents.

For example, [New Door Ventures](#) used the crisis to reshape its entire career-skills curriculum for young people who are out of work or school. In just a few short weeks, [ImmSchools](#) raised \$200,000 to create a COVID-19 response fund for undocumented families, even though such work previously stood outside of the young nonprofit’s field of focus. [The Climate Reality](#)

[Project](#) also had to make a quick pivot, to re-create the way it trained thousands of climate activists to lead change efforts in their communities.

Despite having to re-invent on the fly during a global pandemic, these organizations not only supported their constituents, but did so in new, sometimes outsized ways. In doing so, these and other nonprofits demonstrated one of the core features of organizational resilience: they reframed the crisis, viewing it as an important moment to imagine, and then invent, better possibilities for the communities they serve—even as they and their communities grappled with spirit-depleting adversity.

More likely than not, any nonprofit that seeks to come out of this crisis (or the next) stronger and more adaptable than it was before will have to work through two conundrums: How do we identify a game-changing opportunity when there is so much uncertainty? And then, how do we reduce the risks that come with making that opportunity a reality?

Identifying Opportunity: Karam Foundation

Resilient nonprofits “[think long and short.](#)” They align around a long-term vision of what their community would look like if it was thriving within the next 10 years. At the same time, they map out where they need to land within the next 18 months if they are to make real progress toward that

far-off point on the horizon. Opportunities that nonprofits are interested in—opportunities to unlock momentum toward that 18-month destination—are born out of changes or events that open new pathways to social impact. Those events are likely external, such as a new partnership or funding stream. But they aren't always obvious, and they rarely take shape in one “Eureka!” moment.

Identifying the kind of opportunity that can propel a nonprofit toward its near-term destination during great crisis requires a willingness to focus on what matters most and to flex as on-the-ground conditions change. That was what [Karam Foundation](#) discovered in 2020, when it looked like the pandemic would severely compromise the nonprofit's core program.

Karam Foundation came to life around Founder/CEO Lina Sergie Attar's kitchen table in Chicago in 2007. The original idea was to inspire Chicago's Arab American community to give to worthy causes (“karam” means “generosity” in Arabic), such as supporting under-resourced communities in the city's South Side and Iraq War refugees in Boston. For its first few



Karam Foundation Founder/CEO Lina Sergie Attar
(Photo: Karam Foundation, Courtesy of Karam House)

years, the foundation's business model “was for our bank account to be as close to zero as possible at all times,” Attar recalled. “Whatever we raised, we distributed.”

However, beginning in 2011, Karam put all its focus on Syria, as the country descended into a [devastating civil war](#) that has thus far forced more than 6.6 million of its citizens to flee their homeland. While touring a vast, Syrian refugee camp in Turkey, Attar and her volunteer partners—journalists, writers, professors—imagined an alternative to such semi-permanent camps, where so many thousands of families languished for years.

Rather than attempt to serve the many, Karam Foundation would at first focus on far fewer, by investing in the futures of displaced Syrian young people—the next generation, which was in danger of becoming a “lost generation,” said Attar. And rather than address those young refugees' most basic needs, as big, charitable organizations were already doing, Karam would help them attain a first-class education, built around a [STEM-based curriculum](#) that was developed in partnership with NuVu, a Cambridge, Mass.-based innovation school founded by graduates of MIT. It would also create safe, modern spaces for collaborative learning, complete with Wi-Fi and laptops for every student. Attar and her team called these learning spaces “Karam Houses,” locating one such house in Istanbul and the other in Reyhanli, near Turkey's border with northern Syria.

With the Karam Houses providing an escape from the war's traumas and workshops that fostered critical thinking and the opportunity for self-discovery, many resettled refugee young people flourished. So much so that Karam Foundation was emboldened to define an outsized,



Future Leaders learning the art of storytelling at Karam House. (Photo: Karam Foundation, Courtesy of Karam House)

long-term vision for its future: launch enough Karam Houses and other programming to produce 10,000 leaders by 2028— young Syrians equipped with the skills and knowledge to ripple out into the world and pioneer their own pathways for supporting refugee children and their families.

But then came the pandemic. Because they were public spaces, the Karam Houses were suddenly at high risk of hosting a super-spreader event. In the spring of 2020, Karam Foundation very reluctantly shuttered both houses and scrapped its plan to build a third. “We had to throw away our beautiful plan and that was really, really hard,” Attar recalled. One of the biggest hazards the nonprofit had to confront was the risk to its impact: how could Karam Foundation support its young students virtually, when so much of its work “has to do with the place itself”?

One of Karam’s guiding principles for making consequential decisions amid great

uncertainty is written into its organizational playbook for building resilience: “Challenge ourselves to find opportunities in the face of obstacles.”

Karam set about looking for a game-changing opportunity to accomplish more by redefining its superpower. All resilient nonprofits possess an **inner superpower**— that “special something” that makes the organization a vital ally for those it serves.

At first glance, Karam Foundation’s superpower appeared to be its capacity to create those physical learning environments for war-weary young Syrians. But Karam’s real superpower resided, as it so often does, in something much deeper: Attar and her team’s ability to understand the Syrian refugee experience and respond authentically to refugee needs. That sense of visceral connection is captured in the fact that the Karam Houses were almost entirely run by Syrian refugees, for Syrian refugees.

By tapping into its superpower, Karam Foundation doubled down on continuing to live into its 10-year goal, despite all the obstacles. “We no longer had our space and our kids had nothing at home,” said Attar. “No access to laptops or even access to learning materials.” Nevertheless, the nonprofit re-imagined what it would seek to accomplish in the near term, by paring its strategic plan down to only what mattered most: learning how to teach virtually, while at the same time ensuring that students acquired the tools to learn virtually.

Karam chipped away at the challenge and soon scored a few quick, confidence-building wins. The nonprofit set up bank accounts for refugee families, so it could wire cash stipends to them during a time of great need—reducing the risk of children being forced back into child labor. Staff walked students through the process of setting up Gmail accounts and the Google Hangouts app on their mobile phones, so they could get a break from the pandemic’s isolating effects and socialize with friends. In the ensuing weeks, mentors delivered workshops to students via the Internet and a dedicated team supported Karam’s college students during the shift to remote learning.

As Karam Foundation made some progress toward delivering its programs virtually, it became a little clearer that what appeared to be an insurmountable obstacle might in fact be an opportunity to transform the lives of many more displaced Syrian youth, even after both Karam Houses reopened on a limited basis last fall.

“If this works, our model for scaling completely changes,” said Attar. “We’re no longer limited to operating out of a city or even a country. That’s what our 18-month plan comes down to. By the end of 18 months, we need to know whether we can

deliver our programs online while still maintaining the same quality. It’s a big goal, but it’s very focused.”

De-Risking Opportunity: IRAP

Of course, every potential game-changing opportunity comes with varying degrees of uncertainty. And every nonprofit that chases a chance to affect more lives, Karam Foundation included, must likely have to grapple with at least one of three risk scenarios. There’s a financial risk: is there enough of a dedicated funding flow to sustain the effort—and if the results are promising, scale it? There’s an execution risk: does the nonprofit have the capacity to support the work? And there’s a risk to impact: will this new approach actually make a meaningful difference in the lives of constituents?

One nonprofit that has developed approaches for reconciling some of the risks of pursuing an emerging opportunity is the [International Refugee Assistance Project \(IRAP\)](#). At its core, IRAP is powered by a global network of volunteers—2,100 law students in the United States and Canada, and *pro bono* attorneys from dozens of international law firms and multinational corporations—who since 2010 have delivered free legal aid to 200,000 displaced people from over 70 countries. The organization has also pioneered additional pathways for serving people fleeing war, violence, and political persecution, such as by creating an in-house litigation shop.

One result of that effort: IRAP was the named [plaintiff in the first lawsuit](#) to challenge former President Trump’s 2017 executive order restricting people from seven majority Muslim countries from entering the United States.

Although IRAP has offices in the United States, Lebanon, Jordan, and Germany, it delivers the majority of its legal services remotely, via email, text, and WhatsApp. As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic failed to crack IRAP's bedrock: legal-services teams continued to fight for their clients, given their largely digital-delivery model.

What about new efforts and ideas that IRAP had planned to explore? As was true for many other organizations, the pandemic brought different and greater levels of risk to many of the expansions and innovations that IRAP had wanted to pursue. However, IRAP's director, Becca Heller, believes, "If you don't take risks, you'll never do anything innovative. So we try to figure out how to take those risks in a hedged way."

In fact, for IRAP, instituting ways to evaluate and mitigate risk became the determining factor in enabling them to still bring potentially promising ideas to life, even during an unprecedented time. In the past year, the nonprofit has launched efforts to reunify some of the hundreds of thousands of families that have been splintered by wars and other crises, including more than 150,000 unaccompanied refugee children.

IRAP has also tested ways to extend its legal-aid work to the chronic refugee crisis at the US-Mexico border. And it has begun to explore legal protocols, which are currently nonexistent, for protecting "environmental migrants" fleeing the calamitous effects of climate change—a displaced population that United Nations forecasters say will number nearly [1 billion people by 2050](#).

To make all of this possible, here are practices IRAP put in place to hedge the three kinds of risk when facing great uncertainty.



IRAP Director Becca Heller (Photo: IRAP)

Financial risk: Heller has one simple rule to ensure that IRAP has the financial wherewithal to pursue an emerging opportunity: never implement a pilot project without first lining up at least two years of funding for it. By locking in a longer term, upfront funding flow for its new work, IRAP buys itself some protection against missteps that might sink a core program.

"We have a policy that we won't hire a staff person unless we can ensure it's a permanent job, so naturally we have to make sure we have funding for them on new projects," she said. "But also, you don't want to chase that shiny new thing at the expense of your existing programming."

Execution risk: IRAP expects that with new initiatives, it won't get everything right the first time or for that matter, the tenth time. To protect against a scenario where the inevitable setbacks overwhelm a team or tax other parts of the organization, IRAP starts small, with learn-as-you-go pilot projects. For example, it began its legal-aid initiative at the US-Mexico border with just 30 cases, to better understand the hurdles that must be overcome and to gauge the potential for growth.



IRAP Director Becca Heller speaking after oral arguments in *IRAP vs. Trump*, the first lawsuit to challenge the 2017 Muslim ban. (Photo: IRAP)

IRAP will also form partnerships on new initiatives, to fill skills gaps and areas of expertise. For example, IRAP is working with the Natural Resources Defense Council on its climate displacement project. It also launched its family reunification program in partnership with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and RefugePoint, an NGO that serves at-risk refugees. By striking these alliances, IRAP distributes some of the nontrivial amount of bandwidth and effort that goes into launching, monitoring, and evaluating pilot projects.

Impact risk: To increase the odds that a pilot really does have the potential to scale, IRAP deploys a team to monitor progress. Each month, an interdepartmental group that includes such people as the nonprofit's

litigation and policy directors, as well as the manager running the pilot, reviews what's working, what isn't, and what needs to change. Especially in the early stages, the monthly review process emphasizes learning and experimentation.

Moreover, piloting a promising idea gives organizations the space to test, make mistakes, and learn and improve rapidly. More than 3 million people throughout the world qualify for family reunification, but even with two robust partners, IRAP again started small, with 125 cases in six different countries. "I think that's a responsible way to grow a new program," said Heller. "We're not going to get it totally right. So when we get something wrong let's be open-minded about it, think critically, and address it as we iterate."

This “learn before you earn” mindset helped IRAP pivot from a project that made a lot of sense at the outset, until it revealed a pathway that could potentially propel the organization toward far greater impact.

IRAP launched a pilot to create a searchable database that would track all the various pathways to immigration in various destination countries, such as work visas, education visas, and family reunification provisions. The idea would be for front-line NGOs to use the database to find a pathway for someone who is stuck in one country (say, Afghanistan) to immigrate to another (Switzerland). “Eight months into the project, we realized that family reunification availability exponentially dwarfed every other pathway,” said Heller.

“Reuniting a mom with her kids is pretty much the most nonpartisan, compelling argument you can make [for refugees and asylum seekers],” she continued. “Plus, family reunification is a right in most places and there’s an incredible need for it. But no one has ever tried to create a global, family reunification legal aid team. So we threw out the database and started this pilot with UNHCR.” After commencing with that pilot consisting of 125 cases, by the end of 2020, IRAP’s legal team provided direct reunification services to nearly 900 individuals separated from family members.

IRAP’s shift from the database project to something much bigger underlined an unexpected lesson for would-be innovators seeking to advance their impact during a crisis: pursuing an opportunity almost always comes with an element of risk, but reckoning with risk can sometimes reveal even more of an outsize opportunity.

Some Takeaways

Even in difficult times, nonprofits can still play offense. Sometimes, a crisis can be so paralyzing that it seems almost impossible to map out the best course of action to take. That in fact, there is so much stasis that people decide subconsciously to avoid making any kind of consequential decision at all. That could have been the case for Karam Foundation, when the pandemic forced it to suspend its core program. But instead of hunkering down, the nonprofit stayed positive and looked for low-risk ways to go on offense.

Nonprofit leaders who play offense during a crisis work to develop near-term actions that can still help the organization make progress toward its destination. One way to begin that process is by asking this question: what can we do today, based on where we want to go and where we feel most confident? If there are few or no downsides to the work and the line of pursuit is straightforward, it might well be an opportune moment to act.

More options, and perhaps more opportunities. When organizations like IRAP always have an array of pilot projects in play, they underline the fact that to improve their chances of moving closer to their long-term destinations, nonprofits would be wise to generate a compelling array of new strategic options—exciting alternatives to the status quo. Such organizations generate perhaps a dozen ideas every year, knowing that maybe six will be worth experimenting with and out of those, perhaps a couple will merit a significant investment and one might reveal a powerful way to affect many more lives.

This addition-by-subtraction approach, where nonprofits continually work to build a healthy portfolio of strategic options, helps them better adapt to whatever might come next—a key feature of organizational resilience.

Opportunities aren't always “out there.”

Even though it's important to have a search strategy for identifying emerging opportunities and testing them to see if they are really real, it doesn't always mean that high-potential ideas are to be found only out on the fringe of the organization's experience. Sometimes, they reside right within the organization's core work. The trick is to be alert enough to spot them, even when people are working way down in the weeds.

“So much of our policy asks and opportunities for different litigation services arise out of our direct client work,” said Heller. “Stuff that we wouldn't know needed to be litigated, or we wouldn't know needed a policy fix, but for the fact that we're doing thousands of these cases every year.”

Three Final Thoughts

First: If your team wants to work through options for responding to risks while pursuing an emerging opportunity to advance toward your long-term goals, this [brief primer](#) for starting that conversation can help.

Second: Over the course of this series on building nonprofit resilience, we have described how organizations move through three phases as they lean into adversity. First there is *contemplation*, where nonprofits “think long and short” to define their 10-year vision and map out the first, near-term steps they will take to achieve it. Then there is *preparation*, where they

identify and tap into their superpower—the unique assets that will propel them toward their goal. Finally there is *action*, where they hedge the risks and seize the opportunity for impact.

Based on what Bridgespan has observed, working through these three phases increases the odds that nonprofits will make themselves a bit more fit for the future's challenges.

And finally: As the American Psychological Association has [noted](#), traumatic events often lead people—and we would argue, sometimes even organizations—to isolate themselves, which so often drains their confidence and resolve. But just as it makes sense for individuals to prioritize relationships during periods of great adversity, organizations can prioritize partnerships.

Whether it's hundreds of philanthropies across the United States coming together to launch COVID-19 emergency relief funds or individual nonprofits like IRAP striking alliances with other actors to pilot promising ideas, there is power in human-to-human, organization-to-organization connection. And there is power in recognizing that even in the midst of globe-spanning trauma, we are all in it together.

As Karam Foundation's Lina Sergie Attar put it: “Your privilege and your financial status is not going to save you, not when so much is broken. That's the biggest lesson of the pandemic: we can't be fully well until everybody is well.”

How to Identify Risk While Seizing Opportunity

Resilient nonprofits know that even though a crisis inflicts considerable pain and trauma, it can sometimes yield exciting opportunities to enhance the lives of many more constituents. But as we assert in the article “[For Resilient Nonprofits, There is Opportunity in Adversity](#),” every game-changing opportunity comes with its share of risks. And those risks must be identified and assessed, if the organization is to turn that opportunity into something that truly advances impact.

To begin that process, gather your senior team and create some interruption-free space for a 60- to 90-minute conversation on an opportunity you have identified and the risks that might await. Here are some questions and tactics to get your team started.

Identifying three types of risks that promising opportunities often encounter

- 1. Impact risk:** Will this opportunity actually lead to impact, especially for under-resourced communities? Does our community want it? Will there be sufficient demand to scale it? Would pursuing this opportunity have any unintended consequences for communities of color?
- 2. Execution risk:** Can we deploy current assets or build new assets and capabilities to bring this opportunity to life? Can we operate and prioritize effectively to support such work?
- 3. Financial risk:** Do we have the right funders and levels of funding to pursue this opportunity? Is our business model sustainable, both as we turn the opportunity into a program and then as we scale it?




Assessing each type of risk

Here is a template for identifying potential risks under the above three categories, and then assessing those risks. You can assess each risk based on the *degree of impact* it would have on your organization and the *likelihood* that it would occur.

A risk is...	
HIGH	If this risk happened, it would substantially affect your organization’s path forward <i>and</i> there is a reasonable likelihood that it could occur
MEDIUM	If this risk happened, it would moderately affect your organization’s path forward <i>and</i> there is a reasonable likelihood that it could occur
LOW	If this risk happened, it would marginally affect your organization’s path forward, <i>and/or</i> this risk is highly unlikely to occur

As a team, you'll calibrate your definitions of these assessments based on your organization's context.

Next, write in your **potential opportunity** below and populate your reflections on the potential risks across each of the three scenarios: impact, execution, and financial.

Potential opportunity:		
Risk Scenario	Risk	Risk Rating (High, Medium, or Low)
 Impact Risk		
 Execution Risk		
 Financial Risk		




Source: The Bridgespan Group

Rating the risks associated with a promising opportunity

Here is how a workforce development team rated the risks of pursuing a game-changing opportunity: to influence employer partners to incorporate policies and practices that specifically benefit communities of color.

Assessing the risks of pursuing a promising opportunity

Potential opportunity: Work with our current employer partners to influence them to install workplace practices and policies that specifically benefit communities of color. This might result in our biggest employer partner committing to new practices and being willing to go public with their work.

Risk Scenario	Risk	Risk Rating (High, Medium, or Low)
 <p>Is there a credible path to impact (and impact at scale)?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> These policies won't actually benefit employees of color or lead to longer-term job retention and growth for employees of color 	Low
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our employer partners won't implement new policies 	High
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our employer partners don't want to engage in these conversations with us 	High
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Growing our reputation as an advocate will compromise our ability to place clients in jobs with our employer partners (and recruit new partners) 	High
 <p>Do we have/ can we acquire the necessary assets and capabilities?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We aren't effective as advocates with our employer partners 	Medium
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We can't prioritize this since we need to be focused on building out new partnerships in growing industries 	Medium
 <p>Is there a path to financial resilience?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our current funders won't want to support this work 	Low
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We won't be able to attract new funders to pay for this (or enough new funders above what we need for our skills training programs) 	High
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Growing this work would compromise our earned income from our employer partners 	Medium

Source: The Bridgespan Group

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