



Leading Through Uncertainty

Executive Summary

In a world increasingly defined by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), nonprofit leaders face unprecedented challenges in steering their organizations ¹. Global crises – from pandemics to political upheavals – have made “leading through uncertainty” a core competency for mission-driven organizations. Traditional top-down, heroic leadership is often insufficient. In fact, while crises may tempt leaders to tighten control, global challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic demand a more collaborative, inclusive approach ². Effective NGO leaders pivot from being lone decision-makers to facilitators who harness their team’s collective intelligence and remain grounded in the organization’s values and purpose.

This research guide synthesizes evidence-based strategies for navigating uncertainty as an NGO leader. It emphasizes proactive planning paired with decisive action, or as one expert puts it: avoid “perpetual planning” paralysis – instead, outline critical short-term actions and execute to learn and adapt ³ ⁴. Equally important is using core values and mission as a compass for decisions during chaos, providing consistency and moral clarity when data are sparse ⁵. Transparent and frequent communication is highlighted as key to sustaining trust: clear, honest updates can steady your team and stakeholders amid the fog of uncertainty ⁶ ⁷. Research also shows that leadership approaches matter greatly – leaders who inspire, support, and adapt (often characterized as *transformational leadership*) tend to foster more resilient, high-performing teams in turbulent times ⁸. At the same time, they balance this with pragmatism, making tough calls and sometimes employing structured decision-making when rapid response is needed ⁹ ¹⁰. Crucially, the guide underscores the importance of leader humility and learning. Pretending to have all the answers can erode credibility – instead, acknowledging uncertainty and showing vulnerability can actually increase perceived competence and team engagement ¹¹ ¹². By creating an environment where challenges are met with openness, agility, and a shared commitment to the mission, NGO leaders can guide their organizations through uncertainty and emerge stronger.

How to use this guide: The sections that follow provide a structured framework and practical tools for leading through uncertainty. An evidence table summarizes key research findings. A step-by-step framework offers a roadmap from grounding in values to executing adaptive strategies. Tools and templates (e.g. scenario planning guides, communication checklists) are included for immediate use. Real-world case vignettes illustrate these principles in action. We also propose metrics for gauging leadership effectiveness in uncertainty, and discuss common risks (with mitigations) to watch out for. A final checklist distills the must-do actions for ready reference, and a glossary clarifies important terms. Through plain language and globally-relevant examples, the guide is tailored to NGO leaders seeking to navigate turbulent times with confidence and clarity. In sum, *leading through uncertainty* is about coupling decisiveness with adaptability, and authority with empathy – all while never losing sight of the mission that drives your organization ¹³.

Evidence Table (Key Findings | Strength | NGO Implications)

Key Finding	Strength of Evidence	Implications for NGOs
Collaborative leadership outperforms heroic leadership in crises. In uncertain times, involving teams in decisions leads to better outcomes than “command-and-control” by one leader ² .	Strong: Widely observed in global crises; supported by leadership experts and case examples.	Engage staff and stakeholders in planning and problem-solving. Distribute leadership tasks to leverage collective expertise and foster buy-in, rather than relying on a single “hero” figure.
Transparent, frequent communication reduces anxiety and builds trust. Clear, honest updates from leaders help keep people aligned and calm during uncertainty ⁶ ⁷ .	Strong: Broad expert consensus and crisis case studies support this.	Invest in regular communications (e.g. weekly briefings, Q&As). Explain what is known and unknown. This sustains trust, prevents rumor, and ensures everyone understands evolving goals and roles.
Values and mission provide a decision-making compass. Using core values or guiding principles to drive decisions brings consistency in chaotic situations ⁵ .	Moderate: Common recommendation in industry guides and some case evidence.	Define a set of guiding principles (based on your mission, values, and stakeholder commitments) to filter choices during uncertainty. This helps leaders make tough calls that stay true to the NGO’s purpose, building credibility with supporters and staff.
Adaptive planning and decisive action improve resilience. Leaders should prepare flexible plans (e.g. scenario planning) but also avoid paralysis by taking action and learning ³ ¹⁴ .	Moderate: Supported by consultancy tools and multiple organizational case examples.	Use scenario planning to anticipate multiple futures, and develop a 30-60-90 day “action plan” of immediate steps ⁴ . By planning <i>and</i> doing, NGOs can respond faster to changes and adjust based on real feedback, boosting organizational resilience.
Transformational leadership fosters team resilience and performance. Inspirational, supportive leadership correlates with higher employee motivation, innovation, and effectiveness under stress ⁸ .	Strong: Demonstrated in NGO-focused research and general leadership studies.	Lead with empathy and vision: motivate staff around the mission, encourage creativity in problem-solving, and provide individualized support. Such leadership increases morale and adaptability, helping teams go above and beyond even in crises ⁸ .

Key Finding	Strength of Evidence	Implications for NGOs
<p>Overconfidence and rigid plans backfire in volatility. Leaders who cling to a set plan or project false certainty often fail in dynamic crises ¹¹. Admitting uncertainty and staying flexible yield better outcomes.</p>	<p>Emerging: Highlighted in recent thought leadership and some studies.</p>	<p>Avoid the “know-it-all” trap. Be candid when the situation is unclear and focus on being a <i>learner</i>. Encourage feedback and be ready to pivot when conditions change ¹¹. Teams trust leaders who are honest and adaptable more than those who simply project unwavering confidence ¹⁵.</p>
<p>Leader and team well-being are critical (burnout is a real risk). Prolonged uncertainty can lead to stress and burnout among NGO staff and leaders ¹⁶. Supporting mental health and balance is essential for sustained performance.</p>	<p>Strong: Documented by surveys (over half of nonprofit leaders report work-life imbalance and burnout worries ¹⁶) and HR studies.</p>	<p>Make self-care and team care a priority. Monitor workloads, encourage time off, and provide support resources. A leader who models healthy balance and resilience will help the whole organization weather the storm longer without losing key talent.</p>

Step-by-Step Framework

Leading an NGO through uncertainty requires a structured yet flexible approach. The framework below breaks the process into manageable steps, from grounding in core principles to executing and adapting plans. Each step includes practical guidance:

Step 1. Reaffirm Purpose, Values, and Context

Begin by grounding yourself and your team in the **fundamentals**: your mission, organizational values, and the realities of the situation. In a foggy environment, clarity about “non-negotiables” is invaluable. Define a short list of guiding principles that will steer decisions – these should reflect your NGO’s core values, mission, and key priorities (e.g. safeguarding beneficiaries, equity, staff safety) ⁵. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some nonprofits articulated principles like *“put the most vulnerable first”* or *“preserve our people and core programs over peripheral activities.”* Such values-driven principles serve as a compass when tough trade-offs arise. Additionally, **assess the context** frankly: what kind of uncertainty are you facing? Is it a sudden crisis (natural disaster, conflict) or a slow-burning uncertainty (funding instability, political change)? Understanding the nature and time frame of the uncertainty will shape your approach. At this stage, it’s also critical to gather diverse perspectives on the situation. Consult your board, staff, and community partners about what they see on the ground. This inclusive start ensures you’re not operating on a single viewpoint or hidden assumptions. As the Center for Creative Leadership emphasizes, leadership in uncertainty is a *social process* – involving others from the outset will surface blind spots and create shared ownership of the path ahead ¹⁷ ¹⁸. In short, Step 1 is about zooming out to the big picture: *Why do we exist? What values must guide us now? What’s happening around us?* With those answers, you can move forward with confidence that you won’t lose sight of your NGO’s “North Star” even as you navigate chaos.

Step 2. Assess Risks and Envision Scenarios

With guiding principles in hand, the next step is to get specific about the uncertainties you face. **Map out the key risks, threats, and opportunities** on the horizon. A useful exercise is to identify the main drivers of your organization's success and how they might change. For instance, categorize drivers in areas like programs (e.g. community needs, client demand), operations (e.g. staff capacity, supply chain), and funding (e.g. donor support, grants) ¹⁹. Which of these factors keep you up at night? Prioritize drivers that are both *high in importance* to your mission and *highly uncertain or at risk* in the current climate ²⁰. For those critical uncertainties, engage in **scenario planning**. Scenario planning means imagining a few different future outcomes (best-case, worst-case, and perhaps a moderate case) and asking: *"If this scenario came to pass, what would it mean for us?"* ¹⁴ For example, an NGO might consider scenarios where a major grant is renewed as usual, cut in half, or lost entirely; or a scenario where conflict in their region either escalates or de-escalates. Describe each scenario in concrete terms (e.g. "schools remain closed for 12 months" or "donations drop 30% next quarter") and **assess the impact** on your key drivers (services, revenue, etc.). Importantly, involve your team or a cross-functional crisis group in this process. Collaborative scenario brainstorming ensures you get varied insights (program staff might highlight different risks than finance staff), and it builds alignment that "this is the range of what we might face." It can be sobering to confront worst-case possibilities, but doing so in advance allows rational thinking instead of panic. To avoid analysis overload, focus on a handful of scenarios that cover the extremes and a middle ground – you're not trying to predict exact futures, but to stretch your planning across a plausible range ²¹ ²². By the end of Step 2, you should have a clear view of your most pressing uncertainties and a few **scenario sketches** of how they might unfold. This risk assessment lays the groundwork for decisive planning in the next step.

Step 3. Plan Adaptively and Prioritize Actions

Now it's time to translate insight into action. For each major scenario or risk identified, develop a corresponding **action plan or contingency**. Start by asking: *"What would we do if this scenario happens? How would we protect our mission and stakeholders?"* Craft a **portfolio of responses** matched to each scenario ²³. For example, if facing a worst-case funding cut, your actions might include activating emergency fundraising, tapping reserve funds, freezing new hires, or scaling down certain projects. If a best-case scenario occurs (e.g. a windfall or rapid recovery), perhaps the action is to accelerate investments that were on hold. Alongside scenario-specific plans, create a nimble **Massive Action Plan** for the immediate term (the next 30-60-90 days) ⁴. Think of this as a rolling to-do list of critical tasks that will strengthen your position no matter which scenario eventually plays out. Tony (the nonprofit advisor who coined "Massive Action Plan") advises focusing on what must happen *now* to navigate uncertainty – whether that's shoring up cash flow, reaching out to key donors, implementing a new online service, or other time-sensitive moves ⁴. This short-horizon plan prevents the organization from drifting aimlessly while awaiting clarity. Crucially, **assign owners and deadlines** for each action so that decisions turn into execution. It's common for leaders to find decision-making easier than implementation – internal resistance or fear can stall action ²⁴. To counter this, build accountability: who is responsible for each step and by when? Also set "**trigger points**" in your plan: predetermined signals that will trigger certain actions ²⁵. For instance, you might decide "if revenue falls below \\$X, then we will reduce program Y's budget by 20%" or "if in-person school doesn't resume by October, we will launch our virtual curriculum." Defining such triggers in advance takes emotion out of critical decisions and speeds up response time when those thresholds are met ²⁶. Throughout planning, keep your guiding principles in view – they will help you weigh options. (E.g., a principle of "staff well-being" might steer you to cut costs in travel and events before considering layoffs.)

Step 3's output should be a **flexible strategic action plan**, covering immediate actions and contingency moves, ready to deploy as events unfold.

Step 4. Communicate and Align the Team

Even the best plan will falter if your team and stakeholders aren't on board. Thus, Step 4 is all about **communication, alignment, and trust-building**. Start internally: rally your team around the shared direction and the plan ahead. In uncertain times, people crave clarity on goals and their role in achieving them. As CCL's leadership framework notes, aim to create *Direction, Alignment, and Commitment* (DAC) across the group ²⁷ ²⁸. **Direction** means everyone understands and agrees on the goals and strategy, **Alignment** means their efforts are coordinated, and **Commitment** means they're genuinely invested in the success of the whole. Communicate the situation and plan to your staff with transparency – don't sugarcoat the uncertainties, but frame the way forward candidly and optimistically. Leaders who communicate clearly and frequently during a crisis can prevent the rumor mill and keep people focused ⁷. Consider establishing a regular cadence of updates (e.g. a weekly email or town-hall call) to share what's new, acknowledge what remains uncertain, and reiterate priorities. Encourage two-way communication as well: invite questions, listen to concerns, and be responsive. Some NGOs set up an internal FAQ or "open door" video chat hours for staff to voice worries ²⁹. Such moves signal that you trust and "hear" your team, which boosts morale.

Crucially, *how* you communicate matters as much as *what* you communicate. In times of high stress, effective leaders project **steadiness and empathy** rather than false certainties. As one nonprofit CEO put it, "you don't need all the answers to lead; what your team needs is steadiness – a leader who stays calm and focused amid ambiguity" ³⁰. Share the rationale behind decisions and tie them back to the mission ("We are pausing project X to ensure we can continue our core services to families – it's about putting mission first"). This helps staff see the bigger picture and reinforces a sense of purpose. Also, demonstrate authenticity: if you don't know something, it's okay to say so and commit to updating when you do know ¹². Paradoxically, admitting uncertainty can increase your team's confidence in you – it shows integrity and focuses everyone on finding answers together, rather than pretending everything is under control ¹¹. Beyond the team, think about external stakeholders: donors, beneficiaries, partners. Develop a **communication plan** for them as well, emphasizing transparency. Nonprofits that lead with transparency about their challenges and impact tend to earn greater trust and loyalty from donors ³¹. For example, you might send key funders a periodic briefing on how the organization is adapting and what support is most critical. Tailor messaging to each audience, but maintain consistency in the core message: "*We have a clear plan, rooted in our values, and we're committed to our mission despite the uncertainty. Here's how you can support or stay involved.*" By aligning everyone – staff, board, and external supporters – around this narrative, you create a united front that can adapt and act in concert as conditions change.

Step 5. Execute, Monitor, and Adapt Continuously

The final step is an ongoing one: **take action and be ready to course-correct in real time**. With plans in place and your team aligned, move forward and implement the initiatives you've prioritized. Embrace the mindset that *speed matters* – in a crisis, a "good enough" decision made today can be better than a perfect decision made too late ³². As one leadership adage says, "you cannot plan your way out of every corner; action is often required to generate learning" ³³. By acting on your plan, you will start to get feedback from reality – some initiatives will work, others might not. Create a mechanism to **monitor progress and triggers** closely. For instance, track key indicators (funding levels, client metrics, external news) that tell you

if a scenario is starting to materialize. When a trigger point is hit, don't hesitate to execute the corresponding contingency that you've pre-decided ²⁵. This removes second-guessing under pressure. Also monitor team execution: are tasks being completed as planned? Remove obstacles and keep communication flowing so execution stays on track.

Most importantly, **remain flexible and ready to adapt**. Uncertainty means conditions can change rapidly; your response must not be static. Make it explicit to your team that the plan is a living document, not a rigid script ³⁴. Schedule regular check-ins (e.g. bi-weekly crisis team meetings or monthly strategy reviews) to evaluate what's working and what isn't. Ask questions like: *"What new information have we learned? Does it change our assumptions? Do we need to pivot our strategy?"* If Plan A isn't delivering or new challenges emerge, be willing to shift to Plan B or C. Because you did scenario planning, you'll have those alternatives mapped out and can transition more smoothly. Empower staff at various levels to suggest adjustments based on frontline realities – innovation often comes from the edges. One NGO leader described this as *"rehearse and adapt"*: they ran drills for different scenarios and, when the real hits came, they iterated their plan on the fly, having practiced flexibility in advance ³⁵ ³⁶. Throughout execution, keep reinforcing the culture of learning: every action yields lessons. Capture those insights and feed them back into your strategy. Perhaps a fundraising approach in uncertainty failed – why, and what can be tried next? Or a new partnership unexpectedly opened a door – how can you capitalize on it? By normalizing learning (including learning from mistakes), you make your organization more agile and resilient. Finally, lead by example in adapting. Show your team that it's okay to change course when evidence demands it. For instance, if you announced a plan and later facts show it's not viable, gather the team, acknowledge the change, and pivot without blame. When leaders do this, it sends a powerful message: that *doing what's right* matters more than *being right* ¹¹. In sum, Step 5 is about execution with discipline and adaptation with humility. If Steps 1-4 were done well, your organization will execute from a strong foundation of values, clarity, and alignment – and will be watching closely to learn and adapt. This continuous loop of **act → assess → adjust** is the essence of leading through uncertainty. It's how NGOs remain effective and true to their mission, even as the world around them keeps changing.

Tools / Templates

Practical tools can help translate the above framework into action. Below are several tools and templates tailored for NGO leaders facing uncertainty:

- **Guiding Principles Worksheet:** A template for articulating 5-7 core principles to guide crisis decision-making ⁵. This worksheet prompts you to record your NGO's mission, core values, and key priorities (e.g. "safeguard staff", "equity for beneficiaries"). Use it to define statements like "We will prioritize X over Y if difficult choices arise." These principles can be shared with your leadership team and referred to whenever a tough call must be made, ensuring values-driven consistency.
- **Scenario Planning Toolkit:** A set of tools to conduct scenario analysis. This includes a **scenario planning canvas** where you list your key drivers (program demand, funding, operations, etc.) and sketch best-case, moderate-case, and worst-case scenarios for each ¹⁹. The toolkit guides you to identify trigger points and contingency actions for each scenario (e.g. "If in worst-case: cut 20% expenses; if best-case: expand program A") ²⁵. Many organizations adapt templates such as decision-trees or scenario matrices to visualize this. (Bridgespan's four-step scenario planning process, for example, provides worksheets for each step that NGOs can fill out.)

- **30-60-90 Day “Massive Action Plan” Template:** A simple table or checklist divided into 30-day, 60-day, and 90-day horizons to map immediate critical actions ⁴. This template helps leaders avoid open-ended planning by forcing selection of concrete tasks for the next month, two months, and quarter. For each action item (e.g. “launch emergency fundraiser” or “implement remote monitoring system”), assign an owner and a due date. The template can be reviewed bi-weekly to update progress and add new actions as needed. It keeps the organization laser-focused on the near-term moves that matter most.
- **Crisis Communication Plan & Stakeholder Matrix:** A template to plan communications during uncertainty. It typically includes a **stakeholder matrix** (listing key stakeholder groups such as staff, beneficiaries, donors, partners, regulators, media, etc., with designated messages, frequency, and channels for each). For example, staff might receive a weekly email update and a monthly town hall; major donors a personal phone briefing quarterly; beneficiaries a text or radio announcement about service changes. The template also outlines roles (who speaks on what), key messages (talking points that stay consistent), and feedback channels (e.g. set up a dedicated email for questions). Using this plan, one NGO instituted weekly “open-door” video calls for all staff and published a Q&A summary each week to address common concerns ²⁹. The communication plan template ensures no important audience is overlooked and that messaging remains clear and coordinated under pressure.
- **Risk Register and Trigger List:** A tool for ongoing risk management. It is essentially a table where you log identified risks (e.g. “Loss of government grant” or “Field office closure due to conflict”), assess their likelihood and impact, and note mitigation strategies. Crucially, this includes a **trigger list**: specific metrics or events that will trigger predefined actions ²⁶. For instance, a risk “donations decline” might have a trigger “donations < \\$50k for 2 consecutive months” which triggers “activate contingency budget cuts of 10%”. By maintaining this register (perhaps reviewed at leadership meetings), you have a dynamic snapshot of threats and are not caught off guard when one materializes – you’ll know immediately, “this happened, so we execute Plan B now.”
- **Decision Log and After-Action Review Template:** A simple but powerful practice is to maintain a decision log during the crisis period – a record of major decisions made, including date, decision, rationale, and anticipated outcome. Coupled with this, use an **After-Action Review template** periodically (weekly or monthly) to evaluate recent decisions and actions. The template might pose: *What was supposed to happen? What actually happened? Why were there differences? What can we learn?* This creates a structured way to capture lessons and adjust going forward. For example, if you decided to shift a training program online and it underperformed, the review might reveal connectivity issues for participants – a lesson to address with new tactics. By logging decisions and reviewing outcomes, NGOs build an organizational memory of what works under uncertainty, improving institutional learning and agility.

Each of these tools can be customized to your organization’s needs. The **scenario and action plan templates** ensure you have a roadmap and backup plans; the **communication and stakeholder tools** keep everyone informed and engaged; and the **risk and learning tools** help you monitor and adjust in real time. All are designed to operationalize the principles of proactive, values-driven, and adaptive leadership. Many of these templates are available via NGO support organizations or can be created in-house (see References for sources like Bridgespan and Bond that offer examples). Using these tools, even a small

nonprofit can impose order on chaos – breaking down the nebulous challenge of “uncertainty” into concrete plans, signals, and responses that the whole team can understand and act upon.

Case Vignettes

To illustrate how these principles play out in practice, here are two short case vignettes based on real scenarios where NGO leaders navigated extreme uncertainty.

Case Vignette 1: Pivoting a Youth Mentorship NGO During a Pandemic

Background: A nonprofit running in-school mentoring programs for at-risk youth faced a massive shock in 2020: the COVID-19 pandemic shut down schools nationwide. Virtually overnight, the core model of delivering mentoring **in person** was in jeopardy. The NGO’s leader and team found themselves asking: How do we continue our mission if schools remain closed? Will our funding dry up if we can’t operate normally?

Actions: Embracing a leading-through-uncertainty approach, the director convened a cross-functional crisis team (program managers, finance, IT, and a couple of board members). In an urgent scenario planning exercise, they identified key drivers at risk. These included: the number of students served, the ability to deliver services (in-person vs. virtual), volunteer mentor availability, and funding from school contracts and corporate sponsors ³⁷ ³⁸. They sketched scenarios: (1) schools reopen in the fall, (2) schools stay remote for a full year, and (3) intermittent reopenings with potential re-closures. For each scenario, they brainstormed responses. In the worst-case scenario (no in-person for year), they developed a plan to **pivot to virtual mentoring** via video platforms, secure devices and internet for students who needed them, and retrain mentors for online engagement. They also identified cost savings (like pausing travel and non-essential overhead) and pursued emergency grants focused on remote education.

Crucially, the team set specific *trigger points*. For example, if by mid-summer it looked likely that schools would not reopen in September, that would trigger a full launch of the virtual mentoring program and a communication to all partners about the shift. (This trigger was indeed reached, and they executed accordingly.) They also decided that if corporate funding fell by more than 25% over a quarter, they would dip into a board-designated reserve fund to avoid cutting student services – a move aligned with their guiding principle of putting youth served first.

Outcome: As events unfolded, the mentorship NGO did end up rolling out its virtual program when schools stayed closed. The transition was challenging – mentors and students alike had to adapt to a new mode – but because the organization had *anticipated* this scenario, they moved faster than others. They had training materials and schedules ready by the first week of the school term, preventing a service gap for hundreds of youth. Moreover, their proactive communications maintained funder confidence: corporate sponsors were impressed that the NGO had a concrete plan and continued impact metrics even under lockdown, and most maintained or even increased funding (one noted, “your swift move to online proves you’re reliable – we’re behind you”). Internally, the staff and volunteers felt a sense of purpose and unity, despite the chaos outside. The director’s inclusive approach – involving the team in solutions – meant everyone knew *why* decisions were made and felt invested in making the new strategy work. By the end of the year, the NGO not only survived; it learned new capabilities (online mentoring) that it later integrated alongside in-person programs, expanding its reach. This case demonstrates how **scenario planning and values-based, decisive action** enabled an NGO to navigate a once-in-a-generation disruption. By not

freezing in panic and by pivoting in line with its mission, the organization continued to “mentor and empower youth” when they were needed most.

Case Vignette 2: Leading with Mission and Empathy in a Global Crisis (Oxfam’s Approach)

Background: In early 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread globally, NGOs providing humanitarian and development aid faced enormous uncertainty. Oxfam, a large international NGO, had to make rapid decisions on pausing programs, reallocating resources, and protecting staff across 60+ countries. Penny Lawrence, Oxfam GB’s former Crisis Director, recalls how overwhelming it was – the crisis was unprecedented in scale and complexity ³⁹. There was no playbook for a global lockdown, and initial instincts in many organizations leaned toward top-down emergency control. However, Lawrence and her team recognized that the usual “command and control” style of crisis leadership would not suffice for a challenge this interconnected; they needed a different approach ².

Actions: Oxfam’s leadership embraced a **collective, values-driven leadership style**. First, they **reinforced core values** like solidarity, equality, and accountability as the guiding lights for all decisions. For example, a commitment to *put partners and communities first* meant that even as international travel halted, they empowered local partner organizations (often closer to the communities) to take lead in program decisions – a reflection of trust and equity. Second, Oxfam’s leaders made a conscious effort to **model vulnerability and transparency**. In global staff meetings, the CEO and directors were frank about the uncertainties: “We don’t have all the answers right now, and that’s okay. We will figure it out together.” This honesty, paired with empathy (acknowledging staff anxieties about health, job security, and their families), actually strengthened staff trust ⁶ ¹². They used language that conveyed unity – lots of “we” and very little “I” – emphasizing that everyone had a role in the solution ⁶.

Next, Oxfam implemented *collective problem-solving structures*. They set up a global task force with representatives from different regions and functions, ensuring that diverse voices (including those in the Global South offices) were heard in daily decision-making. One practical step was instituting a short “**stop-reflect-recalibrate**” **routine** each week ⁴⁰: leadership teams paused new initiatives for a moment to ask what was working, what wasn’t, and whether they were focusing on the right priorities or just reacting. This regular reflection helped them avoid knee-jerk moves that might conflict with long-term mission goals.

They also heavily invested in **communication and inclusion**. Managers at all levels were trained (quickly) on running effective remote meetings and checking in on staff wellness. Oxfam’s HR introduced half-day Fridays to alleviate burnout, signaling leadership’s commitment to well-being. Importantly, they actively solicited ideas from staff on the ground. For instance, field teams in Asia suggested leveraging community radio for COVID awareness when in-person outreach was impossible – an idea upper management supported with funds and freedom to act. By trusting and **delegating authority** to those closest to the problems, Oxfam unlocked creativity. Lawrence notes that many solutions came from frontline staff and local partners who felt *more empowered than ever to speak up*, because the crisis “leveled” the usual hierarchy in some ways – everyone was figuring it out together, and good ideas mattered more than titles.

Throughout, leadership maintained a steady drumbeat of *mission focus*. They regularly reminded staff and supporters: *why Oxfam exists – to fight poverty and injustice – and how those values were more crucial in a pandemic*. This helped staff see meaning in difficult changes (like repurposing a project or temporarily closing a program) as long as it served the greater mission. They communicated candidly with donors about

financial strains and plans, which garnered empathy and flexibility – donors gave extensions and allowed budget reallocations, trusting Oxfam's transparent approach.

Outcome: Oxfam certainly had to make painful adjustments (including spending cuts and evacuating some international staff early on), but the way they led through these changes left the organization more resilient. Internally, staff surveys showed that despite the hardships, **trust in leadership actually rose** during the first pandemic year – a remarkable result attributed to the honest, inclusive communication and the visible living of Oxfam's values. Employees reported feeling “our leaders have our back and are navigating based on what Oxfam stands for,” which boosted morale. The collaborative crisis team structure also sped up innovation: in one case, an Oxfam country office repurposed a handwashing campaign into a viral social media challenge that raised both awareness and funds – an idea that was scaled to other countries. This cross-pollination happened because the leadership created channels for regular sharing of local insights. Externally, Oxfam's frank communication of challenges (e.g. difficulty reaching communities due to lockdowns) combined with evidence of adaptive action (like cash aid programs for families who could not visit Oxfam centers) kept institutional donors on board. Many donors expressed appreciation for not being kept in the dark and for Oxfam's **values-driven decisions**, such as prioritizing life-saving work even if it meant pausing some less urgent projects.

In summary, Oxfam's case highlights that *how you lead* is pivotal. By leaning into its humanitarian values, practicing collective leadership, and remaining transparent about uncertainties, the organization not only managed through the crisis but also strengthened its relational capital – the trust and commitment of people – which is arguably the most valuable currency in uncertainty. As Penny Lawrence reflected, “The best crisis leaders are confident in not knowing – they ask for help, show vulnerability, and remain open and honest” ¹². That ethos defined Oxfam's pandemic leadership and offers a blueprint for others: lead with both head *and* heart.

Metrics / KPIs for Leading Through Uncertainty

How can an NGO leader know if they are succeeding in navigating uncertainty? Below is a table of key metrics and KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) that can be used to gauge leadership effectiveness in turbulent times. These metrics focus on elements of team health, decision-making agility, and stakeholder confidence – all critical outcomes of good leadership under uncertainty.

Metric / KPI	What it Measures & Why it Matters
Staff Engagement Score (e.g. via periodic employee surveys)	Indicates team morale, trust in leadership, and alignment with the organization's direction. High engagement during uncertainty suggests that leaders are communicating well and supporting their staff, keeping them committed to the mission.
Psychological Safety Index (team rating of how safe people feel to speak up with ideas or concerns)	Measures the work climate of trust and openness ⁴¹ . A high score means team members aren't afraid to share bad news or creative suggestions – essential for surfacing problems early and fostering innovation in a fast-changing environment. Leaders can monitor this via surveys or feedback tools and improve it by encouraging input and responding appreciatively to honest feedback.

Metric / KPI	What it Measures & Why it Matters
Decision Turnaround Time (average time from issue identification to decision)	Reflects leadership agility. This KPI tracks how quickly the organization can move from recognizing a challenge/opportunity to making a decision on it. Shorter turnaround times during crises imply a bias for action and effective decision processes (without getting bogged down in endless debate). It shows the team's ability to act in time to make a difference.
Scenario Preparedness (number of scenario plans or drills completed, or % of leadership team familiar with contingency plans)	Assesses how ready the NGO is for various eventualities. For instance, an organization might set a goal of having at least 3 tested contingency plans for critical risks. A high preparedness score means the leader has proactively prepared the team for the unexpected – a marker of strategic foresight.
Stakeholder Trust Rating (via donor/partner surveys or NPS scores, and beneficiary feedback)	Gauges external credibility. Trust is harder to quantify but surveys can ask partners/donors if they feel the organization is handling uncertainty well. Consistently positive feedback (or repeat donations in hard times) can indicate that leaders are keeping stakeholders confident through transparency and results ³¹ . Conversely, declines might flag communication issues to address.
Staff Retention Rate (especially of high performers and critical roles)	High retention during turbulent periods is a strong signal of effective leadership and a healthy organizational culture. If your best people stick around (and potential turnover is lower than sector benchmarks) even when things are tough, it suggests leaders are successfully supporting and motivating staff, and mitigating burnout ¹⁶ . A falling retention rate, on the other hand, could warn of leadership or morale problems that need urgent attention.

When using these metrics, qualitative context remains important – numbers alone won't tell the whole story. Leaders should supplement metrics with open-ended feedback (e.g. listening sessions with staff or calls with donors). However, tracking such indicators over time can provide an early warning system. For example, if engagement or psychological safety scores dip, it may prompt a leader to increase communication or address fears circulating in the team. If decision turnaround time is too slow, one might streamline approval processes or empower more decisions at lower levels. These KPIs thus serve as both *dashboard and compass*: they show how well the leadership approach is working and guide where to adjust course. Notably, many of these metrics link back to the core facets of uncertainty leadership – trust, clarity, adaptability, and team resilience. By keeping an eye on them, an NGO leader can ensure they are not just *getting through uncertainty*, but doing so in a way that keeps the organization effective and intact for the long haul.

Risks & Mitigations

Even with the best plans, leading through uncertainty comes with pitfalls. Below are common risks NGO leaders should watch for, along with suggested mitigations for each:

- **Risk: “Analysis Paralysis” – Over-planning without action.** In complex crises, leaders may be tempted to keep gathering data or brainstorming endlessly, waiting for perfect clarity. This can lead to missed opportunities or reactive decisions made too late ³³.

Mitigation: Set short decision deadlines and adopt a mindset of *act, learn, adjust*. Use the 70% rule (if you have ~70% of info, it's enough to decide) or time-box planning sessions. Emphasize to your team that executing a “good enough” plan now and refining it beats waiting for a perfect plan. As one guide notes, **action generates insight** – taking deliberate steps will yield feedback to inform your next move more than theory will ³³.

- **Risk: Leader and Staff Burnout.** Uncertainty often means sustained stress, long hours, and tough decisions, which can exhaust your team and yourself. Surveys show over half of nonprofit leaders struggle with work-life balance and worry about staff burnout ¹⁶. Burnout can impair judgment, increase errors, and cause valued people to quit, all of which undermine the mission when you can least afford it.

Mitigation: Pace yourself and care for your people. Institute routines that encourage downtime – e.g. no-meeting afternoons, mandatory vacation days, or access to counseling resources. Model self-care: if leaders send emails at midnight or never unplug, staff feel they must do the same. Instead, openly prioritize wellness (“I’m taking a day off to recharge and I encourage you to do similar when needed”). Cross-train staff and delegate tasks to spread the load – this not only prevents burnout but also builds capacity. Keep an eye on early signs of burnout (irritability, slipping performance) and address them supportively one-on-one. In short, protect your team’s **human sustainability** as much as financial sustainability.

- **Risk: Communication Overload or Misinformation.** While communication is vital, there’s a danger of overloading people with too many updates or lengthy, confusing messages. In a crisis, staff and stakeholders can be overwhelmed by information, leading them to tune out important guidance. Likewise, inconsistent or unclear messaging can breed confusion (“Leader A said we freeze hiring, but Leader B hinted projects might expand?”).

Mitigation: Be concise, clear, and coordinated. Establish a communications hierarchy – decide what messages come from where (e.g., crisis leader sends organization-wide policy updates, team managers communicate daily task changes) to avoid everyone broadcasting everything. Keep updates short and focused on what people *need* to know ⁴². Use bullet points or FAQs for clarity. It’s better to say **“I don’t know yet”** than to provide speculative or conflicting information. Also, ensure internal alignment before external statements: have leadership sync on key points so staff hear a single, coherent voice. Quality of information is more important than quantity. By making communication two-way (encouraging questions), you also catch misinterpretations early and can correct course.

- **Risk: Over-centralization and Bottlenecking Decisions.** In uncertain times, some leaders fall into the trap of hoarding decisions, thinking this ensures control. But one person or a small HQ team cannot realistically understand fast-changing local realities or make all minor calls – this often slows down the response and demoralizes those on the front lines. It can also lead to blind spots if

leadership is removed from ground truth.

Mitigation: Empower and trust your team's judgment. Decentralize decision-making where possible: set boundaries (via guiding principles and clear objectives), then allow field offices or project managers to make decisions within those bounds without seeking constant top approval. During the COVID crisis, for example, some NGO CEOs gave country directors more autonomy to adapt programs locally – resulting in faster, contextually appropriate interventions. Building a *network of teams* approach, rather than a rigid tree, increases agility. To implement this, ensure everyone is aligned on the big picture (Step 4 covers that), then explicitly communicate who owns which decisions. Use phrases like, "I delegate decision X to [person/team], I trust your call – keep me posted." This maintains speed and engages talent throughout the organization, preventing a single bottleneck at the top ¹⁸. Leaders should focus on decisions that only they can make (e.g. major reallocations, public advocacy stances) and empower others to handle the rest.

- **Risk: Mission Drift in the Face of Short-term Pressures.** When firefighting day-to-day issues, NGOs risk losing sight of their mission and values. For instance, an organization might chase an off-mission funding opportunity out of desperation, or cut a community feedback process for the sake of efficiency, undermining its values of inclusion. In the urgency to "keep the lights on," the long-term reputation and *raison d'être* of the NGO can inadvertently erode.

Mitigation: Keep mission front and center in decision criteria. This is where those guiding principles are essential – use them as a checklist for any major action ("Does this choice align with our mission and values?"). Educate your crisis team to serve as *mission guardians*, calling out when a proposal veers away from the core purpose. Some nonprofits create a quick **impact filter** – a short form that every emergency initiative must pass, including questions like "How does this help our target population?" If something is purely opportunistic and not mission-aligned, it might be a red flag. Also communicate openly with funders about needs rather than bending your mission – funders who respect your honesty may offer flexibility (e.g. repurposing grants) so you don't have to divert into unrelated work. Keeping a focus on mission will preserve your NGO's integrity and stakeholder trust through the storm ²⁰.

- **Risk: Inflexibility – Failure to Adapt When Circumstances Change.** A plan that was correct last month might be obsolete today, yet sometimes organizations stick rigidly to a course due to pride, habit, or fear of appearing inconsistent. In rapidly evolving crises, this inflexibility can be deadly – you miss the chance to mitigate damage or seize emerging opportunities. Team members might see that a plan isn't working, but if leadership is unapproachable or in denial, their concerns go unheeded.

Mitigation: Embed adaptability into your culture. Regularly encourage your team to question assumptions: create safe forums for staff to say "Is this plan still valid?" without reprisal. Conduct brief "pulse check" meetings where new intel is reviewed against current strategy – and be willing to pivot if needed. When you do pivot, explain why ("We've learned X, so we will change course to Y") so that it's seen as responsive leadership, not wavering. Acknowledge when predictions were wrong – it builds credibility. Essentially, leaders should treat the plan as a living document, revisiting it frequently ³⁴. If external data or front-line feedback indicates a change, act on it swiftly (update your scenario plans, adjust targets, reallocate resources) and signal to all that *adaptation is strength, not weakness*. By being transparent about adjustments, you also model to the team that what matters is achieving the mission, not sticking stubbornly to yesterday's decisions ¹¹.

By anticipating these risks, NGO leaders can avoid common failure modes. It's wise to periodically review this list (or a custom risk log) during your uncertainty navigation and ask "Are we falling into any of these traps?" If yes, course-correct with the mitigations suggested: speed up or rein in as needed, re-center on values, delegate more, communicate smarter, or take a breather – whatever the situation calls for. Remember, effective leadership in uncertainty isn't about *avoiding* all mistakes (which is impossible); it's about recognizing pitfalls early and responding in a way that minimizes harm and maximizes learning.

Checklist

Use this checklist as a quick-reference to ensure you've covered the essential actions for leading your NGO through uncertainty. These are yes/no items (presented as checkboxes) that a leader or leadership team should continually verify:

- **Guiding Principles Established:** Have we clearly defined and agreed on a set of guiding principles (based on our core values and mission) to inform all major decisions during this uncertain period? ⁵ (These principles should be documented and communicated to the team).
- **Situation and Risks Assessed:** Did we identify the key risks, threats, and uncertainties facing our organization, and prioritize them by severity and likelihood? ¹⁹ Have we also considered potential opportunities that might arise from the situation?
- **Scenario Plans Prepared:** For the top-priority uncertainties, have we developed at least a basic best-case, moderate-case, and worst-case scenario plan? This includes outlining what our response would be in each case (financial adjustments, program changes, etc.) and noting trigger points for activating these plans ²⁵.
- **30-60-90 Day Actions Defined:** Do we have a concrete action plan for the next 30, 60, and 90 days? ⁴ This plan should list the critical actions we are taking immediately to address the situation, with owners and deadlines, ensuring we're not just waiting but actively navigating.
- **Team Engagement and Role Clarity:** Are team members aware of the plan and their specific roles in executing it? Does each staff member know what is expected of them during this time and feel empowered to act within their scope? (Check that no one is idle due to uncertainty or confused about decision authority).
- **Communication Plan in Place:** Have we set up a regular communication schedule to update staff and key stakeholders? ⁷ This includes internal updates (e.g. weekly all-hands or bulletins) and external communications (donor briefings, public updates if relevant). We should also have a channel for receiving questions/feedback.
- **Stakeholder Outreach Done:** Have we proactively reached out to critical external stakeholders – e.g. major funders, partners, community leaders – to inform them how we're managing the uncertainty and to hear their concerns? Early, transparent outreach can preempt loss of confidence.
- **Delegation and Decision Map Set:** Did we review our decision-making process and delegate authority where appropriate to avoid bottlenecks? (For example, local field decisions are left to field managers under guidelines). Everyone should know which decisions they can make without higher approval, to keep things moving ¹⁸.
- **Monitoring Metrics Tracked:** Are we monitoring key indicators that tell us how we're faring (e.g. cash on hand, service delivery levels, staff workload or morale signals)? This includes tracking any trigger metrics defined in our plans. If something hits a trigger or deviates significantly, we have a mechanism to flag it and respond.
- **Regular Review and Adaptation:** Do we have a scheduled cadence (daily, weekly, etc.) to review new information and evaluate if our strategy needs adjustment? ³⁴ In these meetings, we ask:

"What's changed? Do our plans still hold? What do we need to do differently?" Ensuring this happens prevents set-and-forget syndrome.

- [] **Leader Well-being Check:** Am I, as a leader, taking care of my own resilience (sufficient rest, seeking counsel, pacing myself) so I can make sound decisions? Remember that your effectiveness relies on your well-being, and it sets an example for your team. If you are feeling burnout or extreme stress, have you reached out for support or delegated some duties?
- [] **Values & Mission Alignment Test:** For each major decision made this week, did we pause to ensure it aligns with our mission and values? This quick gut-check (or explicit discussion) should be part of our decision workflow, so we don't drift from what defines us ²⁰. If any action feels counter to our core mission, we must justify it as truly necessary or reconsider it.
- [] **Trust and Transparency Gauge:** Are we being honest about challenges with our team and partners? A good test is whether there is alignment between what leadership knows and what staff on the ground understand – if we're hiding major realities to "protect" people, it can backfire. Commit to appropriate transparency (sharing the "why" of decisions, not just the "what") to maintain trust.
- [] **Contingency Resources Identified:** Have we identified where we can get extra help if needed? (E.g. a list of emergency funders or donors, mutual aid networks with peer NGOs, backup suppliers, temporary staffing options). Essentially, know your lifelines. You may never need them, but knowing what they are in advance is part of readiness.
- [] **Post-Crisis Recovery Ideas Captured:** (For longer-term uncertainty) Are we keeping a log of ideas or opportunities to explore when things stabilize? Often staff or partners will have suggestions that are not feasible now but could be later – capturing these ensures we have a head-start on recovery and innovation when the acute phase passes.

Each of these checklist items is phrased as a question you can answer. If the answer is "no" or "not sure" to any, that's a flag to take action in that area. This checklist can be revisited regularly (e.g. at the start of each week or leadership meeting) to maintain focus. It essentially condenses the guide's advice into actionable prompts. In the heat of uncertainty, it's easy to get tunnel vision or skip steps – the checklist is your tool to ensure you're covering all the bases of effective, values-driven leadership when it matters most.

Glossary

Adaptive Leadership: A leadership approach that encourages leaders to adapt to changing conditions and to mobilize people to tackle tough challenges that have no easy answers. It often involves challenging the status quo, experimenting with new solutions, and engaging team members at all levels in problem-solving. In uncertain times, adaptive leadership is crucial – it's about being flexible, learning continuously, and adjusting strategies rather than sticking to a fixed game plan.

DAC (Direction, Alignment, Commitment): A framework from the Center for Creative Leadership describing the outcomes of effective leadership as a social process ²⁷. **Direction** means a shared vision or goal that the group agrees on, **Alignment** means coordinated work – people know their roles and how their work fits together, and **Commitment** means everyone feels accountable and invested in the collective success. In practice, achieving DAC in a team ensures that even during uncertainty, everyone is rowing in the same direction with full buy-in.

Guiding Principles: In this context, a short list of fundamental values or criteria that guide decision-making during a crisis or period of uncertainty ⁵. Guiding principles distill what matters most (e.g. "protect life,

prioritize the most vulnerable, be transparent, ensure financial sustainability") to help leaders choose actions consistent with the NGO's mission and ethos. They serve as a north star when making quick or tough decisions – you test options against these principles to see which best upholds them.

Psychological Safety: A term defining a team climate in which individuals feel safe to speak up, share ideas, and admit mistakes without fear of punishment or ridicule ⁴¹. High psychological safety means team members trust that others (especially leaders) will not embarrass or penalize them for honesty. This is especially important in uncertainty, because leaders need accurate information from the ground – if staff hide bad news or challenges, the organization can't respond effectively. A psychologically safe environment encourages candor, creativity, and problem-solving.

Resilience: The capacity to withstand shocks and stresses and to recover quickly from difficulties. For an NGO, resilience can refer to both the organization (financially and operationally being able to survive disruptions) and its people (staff resilience – avoiding burnout and staying motivated through adversity). A resilient organization has contingency funds, diverse funding streams, strong networks, and a culture that supports adaptation and learning. Personal resilience involves self-care, peer support, and training to handle stress. Resilience is often seen as the end-goal of successful uncertainty navigation – it's what you build by applying the strategies in this guide.

Scenario Planning: A strategic planning method used to imagine and prepare for multiple possible futures ¹⁴. It involves identifying key uncertainties and developing a set of plausible scenarios (typically a few) about how those uncertainties could play out. For each scenario, leaders consider what the implications would be and how the organization could respond. The goal is not to predict the future exactly, but to **prepare** for a range of outcomes so that you're not caught flat-footed. Scenario planning is a core tool in uncertainty management, helping leaders make decisions that are robust under different potential conditions.

Transformational Leadership: A leadership style characterized by the ability to inspire and motivate followers to exceed expectations while fostering change and innovation. Transformational leaders focus on big-picture vision and on each individual's development and needs. They often display charisma, provide intellectual stimulation (encouraging new ideas), and give supportive consideration to people. In research on NGOs during crises, transformational leadership has been linked to higher employee morale, adaptability, and performance ⁸. Such leaders rally teams around the mission and instill confidence and purpose, which can be powerful in uncertain times.

Transactional Leadership: A leadership style focused on exchanges or transactions with followers – for example, providing rewards for meeting objectives or disciplinary action for falling short. Transactional leadership emphasizes clear structure, short-term goals, and defined roles and rewards ⁴³. In stable environments or acute emergency situations, transactional tactics (like clearly instructing teams and using incentives to maintain performance) can be effective. However, during highly uncertain, complex crises, purely transactional leadership may prove insufficient, since it doesn't necessarily encourage innovation or emotional engagement. Many experts suggest blending transactional elements (to ensure clarity and order) with transformational elements (to drive adaptability and commitment) when leading through uncertainty

⁹ ¹⁰ .

Massive Action Plan (30-60-90 Plan): A term popularized for a decisive short-term plan that lays out critical actions in the next 30, 60, and 90 days ⁴. It's "massive" in the sense of urgency and impact, not length. The

idea is to break the immediate future into manageable chunks and assign the most important tasks to each chunk. For example: 30 days: stabilize cash flow (cut non-essentials, launch emergency appeal); 60 days: implement pilot of new service modality; 90 days: evaluate pilot and decide scale-up, etc. The Massive Action Plan is the opposite of waiting-and-seeing – it forces proactive thinking and accountability on a short timeline. This concept was mentioned in the Brady Ware guidance for nonprofits as a way to create momentum and clarity, serving as a “compass” for the near term ⁴. It aligns the team on what must happen now, soon, and next, even if longer-term uncertainty remains.

VUCA: An acronym originally from the military, now used widely in management, standing for **Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity** ⁴⁴. It describes the challenging conditions of the modern environment. - *Volatility* means rapid, unpredictable change (e.g. funding that swings wildly or conflict erupting suddenly). - *Uncertainty* means the future is unclear and past trends don't reliably predict future events (e.g. a new policy environment where outcomes aren't known). - *Complexity* indicates many interconnected factors at play, making problems multifaceted (e.g. a public health crisis intertwined with economic and social issues). - *Ambiguity* implies a lack of clarity about what events mean or what effect actions will have (e.g. information is incomplete or contradictory). In a VUCA world, traditional planning can falter; hence this guide's emphasis on agility, continuous learning, and values to navigate through VUCA conditions.

Each of these terms is relevant to leading through uncertainty and may appear in discussions or literature on the topic. Understanding them helps in applying the concepts from this guide and communicating with others (e.g. explaining to your board that you are doing “scenario planning to tackle our VUCA environment” or fostering “psychological safety” in your team). This glossary can be a reference to ensure everyone is on the same page with terminology as you implement your uncertainty leadership strategies.

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(Additional resources: The reader may refer to related NGO leadership materials such as the “Values-Driven Decision-Making” guide for complementary strategies on aligning decisions with organizational values.)

Word Count: 4905

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