

# Supporting third sector organisations in crisis

**A guide for development workers**

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## About this guide

This guide is for people whose role is to provide support and advice to third sector organisations. The term ‘development worker’ is used throughout to refer to them, whether they are infrastructure workers, consultants or management advisers. ‘Third sector organisation’ refers to not-for-profit organisations including charities, community groups, social enterprises and voluntary organisations.

This aim of this booklet is provide a practical framework for use in a range of situations, with a particular focus on how to work with organisations in times of significant change or difficulty. This might include the potential or actual loss of a major funder or contract; the loss of key staff; the emergence of new competitors or a change of chairperson or senior staff member.

There are many excellent resources which provide frameworks and approaches to help diagnose organisational issues and plan action. However there’s more to development work than techniques and tools and this guide focuses on the skills and process aspects of development work. It is intended to be a useful reference to help boost your skills and increase your confidence in managing situations in the organisations you support.

We hope you enjoy this booklet. It’s designed to be accessible and easy to read, to dip in and out of. It’s for those moments when you need guidance and inspiration for the work ahead!

This guide is set out in three main sections.

- The first section considers how all organisations experience challenges and why third sector organisations tend towards particular difficulties.
- The second section focuses on understanding the role of the development worker. With the challenges organisations face in mind, it explores the different roles the development worker can usefully take, the advantages and disadvantages of each and the importance of agreeing expectations of the role with the organisation being supported.
- The final section proposes a process of providing support which will enable the development worker to work effectively under pressure. It also introduces some of the ‘softer’ skills of support including working with key people, establishing credibility and managing difficult situations.

# 1. The challenges of third sector organisations

As a development worker supporting third sector organisations it is inevitable that you will at some point have to work with organisations facing crisis. This section considers some of the aspects and origins of the challenges facing third sector organisations.

## Phases of organisational development

As they grow and develop all organisations go through phases, with each phase bringing its opportunities and challenges. Typically, when an organisation starts up, it will be a small group of volunteers or staff working closely together, galvanised by a common aim. As they are more successful this informality will bring problems because a lack of formal procedures will make it difficult to maintain consistent communication and standards. It is usual then for an organisation to respond by developing processes and procedures. This will take the organisation into a new phase and this new professionalism will at first be welcomed. Yet this will in time bring new challenges as staff feel the organisation is becoming depersonalised and the collective sense of purpose fragments. Normally, an organisation will then move to devolve power and again in turn this will bring benefit as well as new difficulties.

And so it goes on. All organisations as they grow and develop experience new challenges and every response to a challenge will bring an opportunity and a potential crisis.

So in working with organisations, whether they are just starting up or have been around for many years, they will be at a stage of development with associated difficulties.

## The crisis habit

There is also a theory that people get into habits of behaviour and for some, they might get used to being in a crisis. If you have ever worked providing emergency support to people you will know that there are some individuals who will regularly come for help, claiming immediate dire consequences if you do not meet their demands. This mode of behaviour might have been helpful for them at some time in the past to ensure their needs are met and it takes presence of mind and strength not to succumb to such pressure. Similarly, some managers may have at some point in the past seen the value of a crisis for getting things done quickly and got

into the habit of using crisis as a way of motivating their teams. The outcome of this behaviour is that the sense of crisis becomes an accepted part of the organisation culture and a way of working.

## The nature of third sector organisations

Third sector organisations are often subject to particular problems. Smaller voluntary groups frequently have a precarious existence, with short-term insecure funding which promotes high turnover as staff leave in search of more job security. Employing volunteers provides great benefits but brings its own challenges as they work, not for financial reward, but for an intrinsic sense of satisfaction, which is more complex to manage. Add to this the fact that voluntary organisations are often providing services to people in distressing and chaotic situations and it is no surprise that third sector organisations can seem particularly susceptible to crisis and stress.

So with the inevitable challenges of organisation development, the tendency some people have to gravitate towards a crisis habit and the unique challenges embedded in the structure of the third sector, it is safe to assume that all development workers will at some point encounter 'a crisis'.



### So what?

If you are faced with an organisation that might be in crisis, ask yourself the following questions.

Is this a typical phase of organisational development?

Are the staff in a crisis habit?

Are these typical challenges for third sector organisations?

Do you have concerns over:

- safety of service users, volunteers or staff?
- legality? Is the organisation operating illegally?
- finance? Is the organisation in immediate financial danger?

From the evidence you have seen, what's the worst that could happen?

What are people saying? Is there evidence to support this?

**Appendix A** has more information on diagnostics to help you understand the true nature of the situation.

If you are in any doubt, discuss the situation with your manager or colleagues to help build a picture of the true nature of the crisis. **Appendix B** also has a list of useful organisations that can provide advice and support on what to do.

## 2. Understanding your role

Section two gave some context to the kind of challenges facing third sector organisations, the kind of everyday difficulties they may be facing. An effective development worker is sensitive to these challenges and understands their role within the situation. This involves knowing why they are there, what they can and cannot do and sharing this understanding with the organisation they are supporting.

One of the reasons people providing support to organisations encounter problems is that the organisation and the development worker have different expectations of the development worker role. Some organisations or groups may not have worked with organisational advisers or consultants before, and have little experience of using an external person's experience and perspective. It is therefore important to clarify your role when you first meet with an organisation.

### Three Roles

Workers advising organisations can essentially take three roles (Ed Schein, 1999):

- the role of expert
- the role of a pair of hands
- the role of facilitator.

### The expert role

If you take on the role of 'the expert' development worker then you will be expected to know the answers and confidently tell the organisation what to do in any given situation.

If both the development worker and organisation agree that this is an appropriate role then changes can happen quickly and staff feel 'safe'. People often welcome an authoritative expert who will decisively tell them what to do, especially when in crisis. It allows them to relax and simply follow their instruction.

If the development worker gets it right, they can become indispensable and staff may want them to stay and run the organisation. If the development worker gets it wrong, the staff can conveniently pass over the blame and avoid responsibility for the problem themselves.

While the organisation might want you to take on this role, think carefully before you agree to be an expert development worker and whether the benefits really outweigh the potential pitfalls.

### **The pair of hands**

The development worker who acts as a pair of hands is effectively another member of staff. They will get in and work with organisational staff as a peer.

This allows the development worker to feel useful. For some of us, there's nothing worse than watching people work hard and not rolling up our sleeves and helping. It also allows the development worker and organisational staff to feel like part of a team.

But there are disadvantages. The development worker may come to be treated as another volunteer/member of staff and consequently will lose what may make them most valuable – their objectivity and fresh perspective on the situation.

### **The facilitator**

A development worker who acts as a facilitator will support the staff to come to their own conclusion about the most appropriate course of action. They will not tell the organisation the answer but will ask questions to help them decide the course of action.

This allows the organisation to take responsibility for finding their solution and empowers organisational staff. The process of providing support then becomes a learning process. However, facilitating others to develop their own solutions can take a very long time, which the organisation might not have. Staff and volunteers may not want to be supported to explore the options but prefer an extra pair of hands or the expert's answer.

So, different roles can be appropriate in different situations. There may be times when you can confidently be the expert and times when the facilitator role is more appropriate. The development worker is treading a fine line of being supportive while remaining objective. You need to bring a fresh pair of eyes to the situation and to reflect back what you honestly see, rather than what people want you to see.

What is most important is that you:

- understand the nature of the challenges
- agree with the organisation the most appropriate role for you to take
- understand the advantages and disadvantages of your chosen role and manage the consequences.



### **So what?**

Next time someone comes to you with a problem or you are giving advice and support to an organisations, notice which role you tend to adopt.

Do you want to jump in and give advice or are you rolling up your sleeves to deal with the problem yourself or do you ask questions to help them find their own solution?

What is really the most appropriate role?

## 3. The process of providing support

As well as being clear about their role, an effective development worker will also work through a logical step-by-step process of support. Having this process is important in maintaining boundaries between the development worker and the organisation. Without this, the work of the development worker can easily merge with that of the organisation and the problems of the organisation can become problems for the development worker.

When an organisation is having difficulties or is in crisis it is easy to feel pressured by the urgency of the situation to act. While this is an understandable response, it is important to keep to a process. Working through this staged approach gives structure to what could otherwise be a stressful and chaotic situation.

Providing support to an organisation is a three stage process:

- Stage one: set expectations
- Stage two: provide support
- Stage three: move on

Below are some of important aspects of each stage.

### Stage one: set expectations

The first stage of providing support focuses on how you and the staff of the organisation will make best use of the time and resources available to optimise your impact on the work ahead. Some of the most important tasks to cover at this stage are: background research and reading; understanding the context and desired outcomes; clarifying your role; and agreeing ways of working.

#### Background research and reading

This is the time to do a general search on the internet to find out about the organisation and to collect any published literature. This might include:

- reading leaflets
- reading past plans and funding applications
- looking at documents filed with the Charity Commission.

### **The context**

Get clarity from the organisation about what the issues are and how this situation has arisen. Also discuss what they want from you. Some of the key questions to ask them are given below.

- What is their desired outcome?
- If it all goes well what do they want to happen?
- How do they want you to contribute to this?

If the organisation is unclear about what the issues are, try using a diagnostic tool. You can work systematically through a tool or use it to prompt useful questions. See **Appendix A** for more information on diagnostic tools.

### **Your role**

This is the time to clarify expectations as to how you will work, whether you will be facilitating, being an expert or a pair of hands helping out for a limited time.

### **Ways of working**

You also need to agree with the organisation how the working relationship will be managed. For different tasks consider:

- Whose responsibility will this be?
- When will it be done?
- What are expectations in terms of ways of working?

Use a table like the one overleaf to record your agreement on ways of working.

	Example
Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting up meetings</li> <li>• Deciding on the framework</li> <li>• Communicating with people</li> <li>• Keeping the process on time</li> </ul>
Timing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By when will you be started / finished?</li> <li>• What are the important dates?</li> <li>• Do key people have major holidays or deadlines?</li> </ul>
Ways of working	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where will you meet?</li> <li>• How quickly will you respond to calls or e-mails?</li> <li>• Will you organise papers and agendas before you meet?</li> </ul>

It is good practice at this early stage to be clear about the boundaries of your involvement and the time or situation when you will stop providing support.



### So what?

Think back to a project or assignment which did not go as your or others expected.

In what ways were the expectations mismatched?

What could you have discussed or considered earlier in the project which would have helped make expectations more realistic?

## Stage two: provide support

The support you provide will depend on the context, what your role is and the expectations and agreement you have made with the organisation in stage one.

**Appendix C** lists a range of sources for frameworks, tools, and techniques for supporting organisations.

However, regardless of what specialist support you actually provide, there are three important skills you need to develop if your support is to be heard and effective:

- Identifying and working with key players
- Establishing credibility
- Managing difficult situations effectively

### Identifying and working with key players

Whatever the issue and the proposed solution, you need to be sure that the individuals you are working with have the power and influence within the organisation to really make a difference. During the course of providing support you will be liaising with staff at all levels, but you need to know that you have the support of the chair, trustees, director, chief executive or whoever is committed to making the support work.

Identify who has the power to change things and make sure you are working with them. As you are working, schedule regular update meetings with them. It is likely that the key players will be under intense stress and may be particularly short on time and patience. Be concise and supportive. Save difficult discussions for one-to-one meetings.

When you are working with key individuals try to:

- understand them  
Look beneath the obvious and ensure what you are suggesting is not going to negatively impact on their concerns and motivations. For example, if you are suggesting a course of action which might be helpful to the organisation but could highlight to the board an oversight by the chief executive, then the chief executive is unlikely to support you. Don't rely on logic to influence others – there will be many other factors to consider.
- ask open questions and listen  
Contrary to popular opinion, good influencing is not about talking but about listening. Make sure you give them time to tell their story.

- stay positive.  
Don't be negative and add to the difficulties by pointing out their and others' mistakes!

### **Establishing your credibility**

We all know examples of situations where reasonable proposals or suggestions are ignored or not taken seriously and there are many reasons why some people are heard and others are not.

What is widely acknowledged though is that what a person is saying is only one element of the messages they are conveying. Their tone of voice and body language, among other things, also contribute to the message they are communicating.

Accordingly, if a person wants to be regarded as influential and serious, it is not only their words but other aspects of their demeanour which need to communicate that message. It is important that there is congruence with the tone of voice, body language, words and dress, all complementing and combining to communicate the one clear message that 'what I am saying is important and needs to be listened to'.

Here are some tips if you want to help boost your credibility.

#### **Dress**

What we wear communicates how we see ourselves and how we want others to see us. If in doubt, always dress with more formality than might be necessary.

#### **Body language**

With body language interpretation, it is important to recognise that the message being received may not be the message intended. The purpose of awareness in this field is to appreciate the messages others might be taking from what you are doing.

Here are some of the most common interpretations.

- Sitting too far back in the chair/slouched: *disinterest*.
- Crossing legs and arms, clenching hands, leaning away: *defensiveness*.
- Head in hands, staring blankly, little or no eye contact, doodling, yawning: *disinterest*.
- Fidgeting, moving your legs up and down, blinking frequently: *nervousness*.

### **Tone of voice**

Similarly, tone of voice can communicate messages.

- Very quiet: *nervousness*.
- Monotone: *lack of interest/boredom*.
- Overly modulated/ high pitch: *nervousness/lack of confidence*.
- Loud: *aggression*.

### **Choice of words**

As well as tone of voice and body language, think about the words you use.

Avoid using modifiers. For example, don't say 'it would be quite nice if you would stop shouting' do say 'please stop shouting'. Too many modifiers communicate a lack of confidence.

Be brief and concise. This suggests clarity of thought and confidence.

Be careful with disclaimers and apologies. Don't say sorry if you're not sorry. Again this communicates lack of confidence.

### **Deal confidently with difficult situations**

The nature of development work means we frequently come across difficult situations. The way we respond to and manage these will significantly affect our effectiveness.

Remember, when dealing with a difficult situation, no matter how difficult it might be, do not take it personally. An important element of the development worker's job is to act as a role model, to stay professional and calm even when others do not. Remain aware of your own emotions and feelings and keep them in check. If you succumb to a heated or sarcastic comment made in a tense moment it can quickly undermine your credibility and reputation.

If you are finding a situation or an organisation difficult to manage, ask your colleagues and managers for advice and support.

Underlying the difficult situations and resistance are emotions and feelings. When these are unacknowledged and ignored, they magnify. People will become angrier and less able to engage as they are distracted by their own internal emotions.

When you see that a situation is becoming difficult, the most useful approach is to simply state what you see. Reflect that the situation is difficult and then stay quiet and give people the space to talk. They might

come back and confirm your perception, tell you they are angry and why. Then you can have a discussion. Or you might find that your perception was wrong. They might be worrying about something completely different or not even be worried at all.

Whatever the circumstance, do not take difficult situations and resistance as a reflection on your capability. If you start feeling emotionally hurt or hard done by, then the situation will escalate.

If an organisation is regularly difficult to work with, a member of staff is angry or rude, remember you can always stop the work and walk away. If you think this might be a problem you can, when you are setting expectations in stage one, state that if people are not co-operative this is a possibility.



### **So what?**

Observe people who you think communicate credibility. How do they: dress, stand, use words, use silence, use facial expressions, respond in difficult situations?

Is there anything you can learn from them?

### **Stage three: move on**

Throughout your time providing support you will have maintained regular contact with staff and it will be clear from the first stage, when you set expectations, when you anticipate bringing your work with the organisation to a close.

However, no matter how often you reiterate the inevitable end of your involvement, some organisations will still hope you will continue to work with them. The extent to which you do this will of course depend on how much time you have but you will also want to consider whether the organisation will become over-reliant on your help and whether you are in danger of becoming an unpaid member of staff.

To help bring the work to a close, tell the organisation well in advance when you will stop working with them and find out who will take on the work after you have gone. Organise a meeting with the person with whom you set the expectations and spend some time to discuss what went well and what did not go as expected.

## 4. Closing thoughts

Being a development worker is a uniquely interesting role. You get a window into organisational situations and challenges that few other jobs will give you. But it can also be stressful, isolating and tiring. To guard against burn out, ensure you have a good network of supportive colleagues who will advise and guide you when the going gets tough. At the end of each assignment, take some time out to reflect on the feedback from the organisation and your perception of the success of the project. Write down three things you will do differently next time, put it somewhere visible, then close the assignment and move on.

Good luck!

## References

- Adirondack, S (2006) *Just About Managing*, LVSC, London.
- Block, P (1999) *Flawless Consulting*, Pfeiffer, USA.
- Knight, S (2002) *NLP At Work*, Nicholas Brealey, London.
- Rogers, J (1999) *Influencing Skills*, Management Futures Ltd, London.
- Schein, E (1999) *Process Consultation Revisited: Building the Helping Relationship*, Addison-Wesley/Longman, USA.
- Taylor, G (1999) *Managing Conflict*, London, DSC.

## Appendix A

For a comprehensive guide to health checks for third sector organisations see *How are you doing? A review of health checks used by voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations in their capacity building work* by Jean Ellis and Tracey Gregory, downloadable from [www.ces-vol.org.uk](http://www.ces-vol.org.uk)

The table below summarises some of the publicly available tools.

Tool	Originator	For more information
Group/organisational health check	Community and Voluntary Partners	<a href="http://www.bolsovercen.org.uk">www.bolsovercen.org.uk</a> 01623 747147
Croydon Capacity Building Toolkit	Croydon Voluntary Action	020 8684 3862
Fit for Purpose: The Development Trust Association healthcheck for community enterprise organisations	Development Trusts Association	<a href="http://www.dta.org.uk">www.dta.org.uk</a> 0161 432 5627
GRIPP	Greater Merseyside Change Up Consortium	<a href="mailto:info@changeupmerseyside.org.uk">info@changeupmerseyside.org.uk</a>
Perform Diagnostic	Social Enterprise Works	<a href="http://www.c3partnership.org">www.c3partnership.org</a> <a href="http://www.socialenterpriseworks.org">www.socialenterpriseworks.org</a>
Early Warning Guide	Development Trusts Association	<a href="http://www.dta.org.uk">www.dta.org.uk</a> 0161 432 5627
Way Ahead: A development workbook for voluntary organisations	Voluntary Arts Network	<a href="mailto:information@voluntaryarts.org">information@voluntaryarts.org</a> 02920 395 395

# Appendix B

## Resources and further support

### **Charity Commission**

For information on charity law and regulation.

Helpline: 0845 3000 218

[www.charity-commission.gov.uk](http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk)

### **Health and Safety Executive**

Government website focusing on all aspects of health and safety in the workplace.

[www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)

### **Charities Evaluation Services**

For information on all aspects of monitoring and evaluation, outcomes, quality and performance management.

[www.ces-vol.org.uk](http://www.ces-vol.org.uk)

### **National Council for Voluntary Organisation (NCVO)**

NCVO has several specialist teams who provide information, advice and support on different aspects of voluntary organisations.

[www.ncvo-vol.org.uk](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk)

### **Volunteering England**

Source of information on recruiting and managing volunteers.

[www.volunteering.org.uk](http://www.volunteering.org.uk)

### **ACAS**

ACAS provides information and support on resolving employment and staff disputes.

[www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)

## **Tools and techniques for dealing with specific organisational issues**

Comprehensive information and advice on a range of third sector organisational issues

[www.knowhownonprofit.org](http://www.knowhownonprofit.org)

Human Resources

[www.skills-thirdsector.org.uk](http://www.skills-thirdsector.org.uk)

Finance

[www.financehub.org.uk](http://www.financehub.org.uk)

Fundraising

[www.how2fundraise.org](http://www.how2fundraise.org)

Governance

[www.trusteenet.org.uk](http://www.trusteenet.org.uk)



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A joint initiative to strengthen support services for the third sector

