



ENHANCING COMMUNICATIONS

How senior leadership and management can navigate honest conversations with frontline staff in times of crisis and change

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THE MISINFORMATION CHAIN

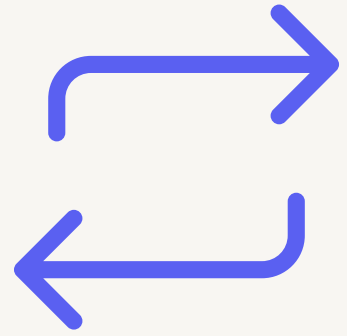
You have 1 minute to get this message across the room!



Crisis: A crisis in a nonprofit organization refers to an unexpected and disruptive event or series of events that significantly threatens the organization's stability, reputation, operations, or ability to deliver its mission.

Types of Crisis

- **Financial Crisis:** Loss of funding or unexpected financial challenges that jeopardize the nonprofit's ability to operate.
- **Leadership Crisis:** Sudden departure or scandal involving key leadership, leading to instability.
- **Public Relations Crisis:** Negative publicity, legal issues, or controversies that damage the organization's reputation.
- **Natural or External Crisis:** Disasters, pandemics, or external factors that directly impact the nonprofit's community or operations.



Change: Change in a nonprofit refers to any significant transformation within the organization that alters how it operates, interacts with stakeholders, or delivers its mission.

Types of Change

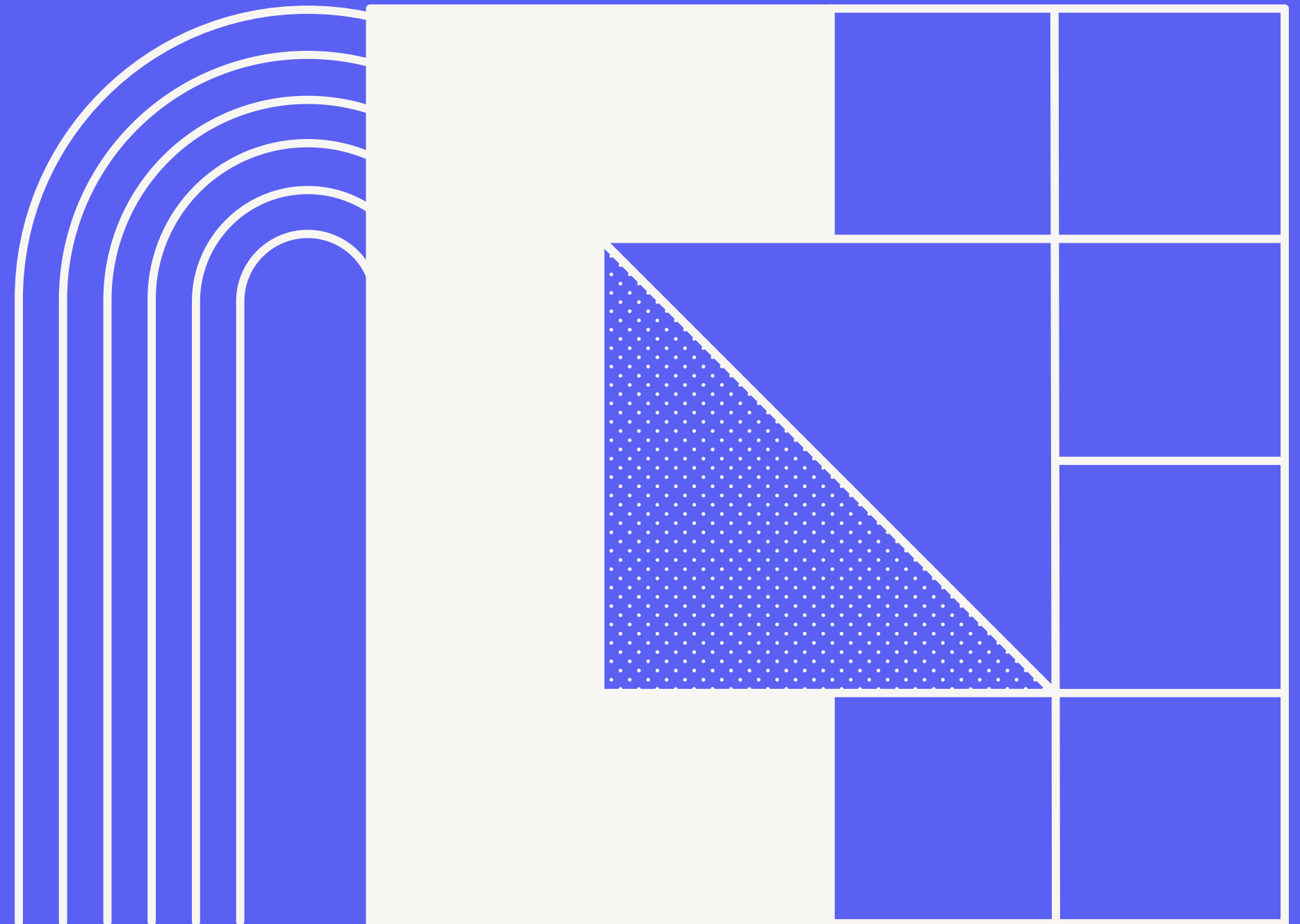
- **Structural Changes:** Shifts in organizational hierarchy, departments, or roles that may impact how services are provided.
- **Strategic Changes:** New mission, vision, or goals that require the organization to pivot in its approach to achieving its objectives.
- **Cultural or Operational Changes:** Shifting the internal culture, such as adopting new technology, processes, or leadership styles.
- **External Environmental Changes:** Alterations in the funding landscape, regulations, or societal needs that require the nonprofit to adapt.



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Staff Survey

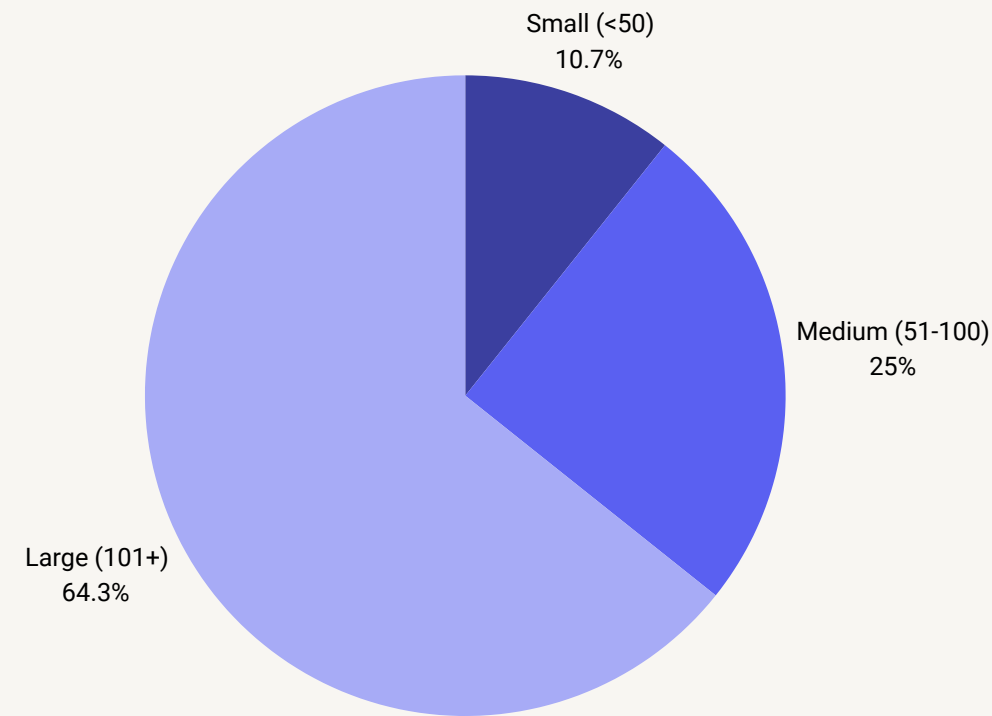


Survey Methodology & Demographics

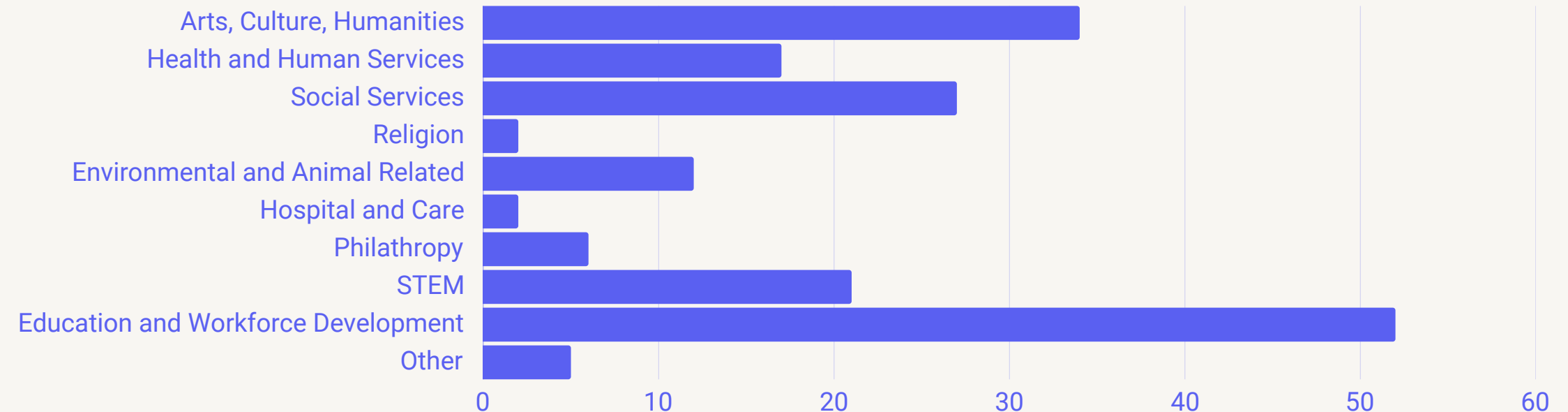
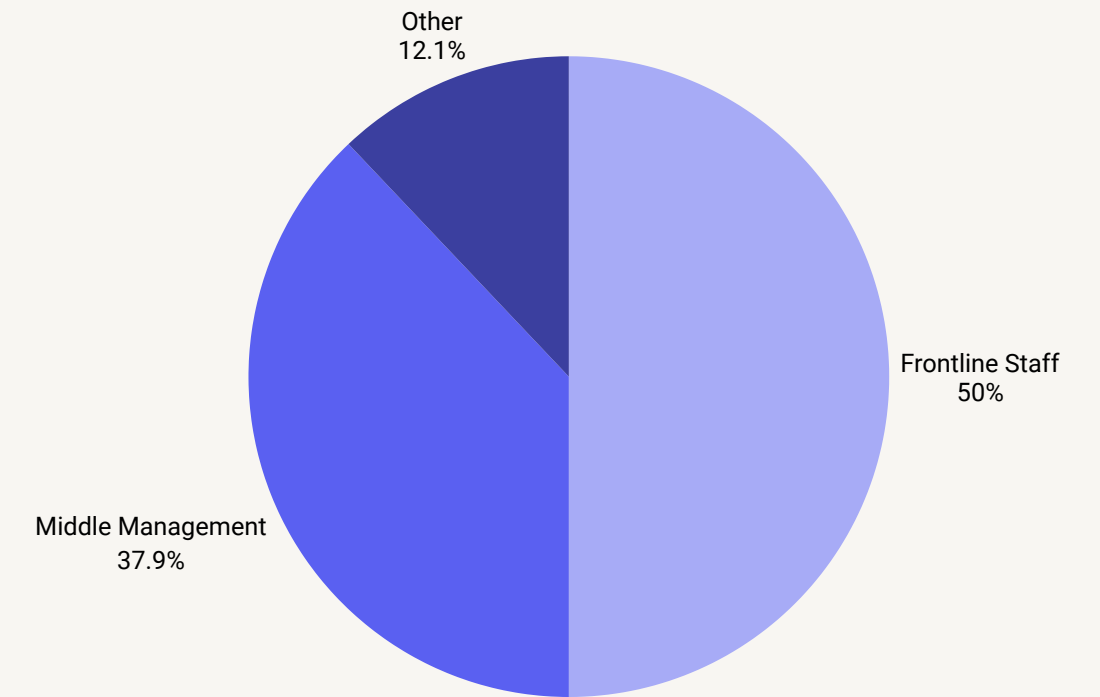
Survey was distributed through email to our Emerging Leaders cohort and staff at our organizations. Results were collected anonymously.

58 Staff Surveyed,
Representing:

Organization Size



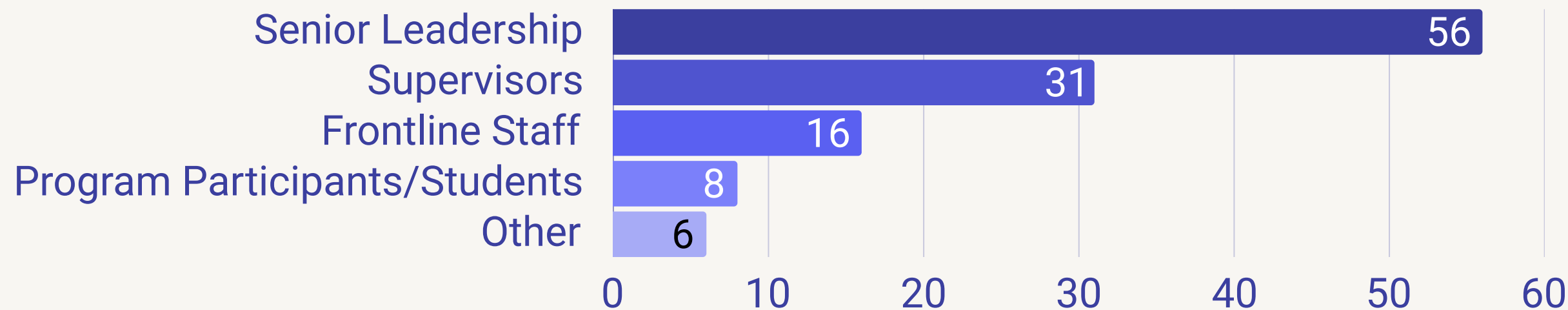
Staff Title/Position



Our survey methodology was unable to account for voices from staff who have left or have been laid off, temporary staff who have moved to other positions, and program participants/students.

Survey Results

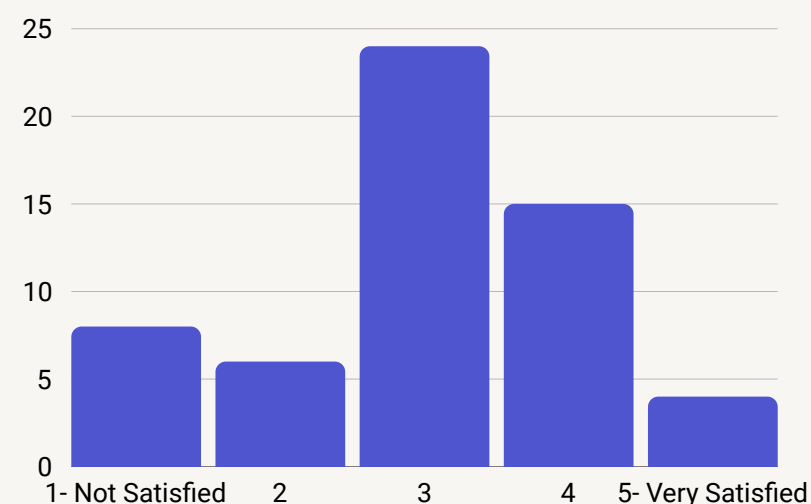
Who do you feel is included in the decision making of organizational/program change?



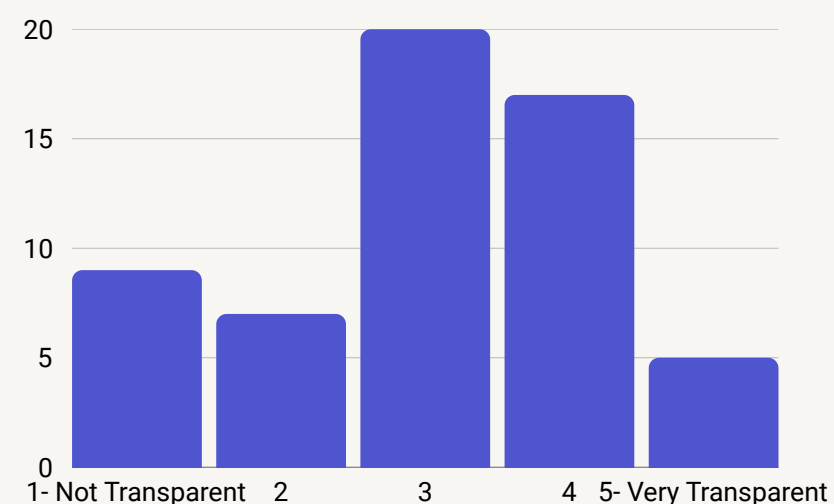
Resources offered to staff during times of crisis:

- ADP, EAP, benefits package
- Conversations with manager
- External trainings/workshops
- Protocols/scripts
- Contract social worker or therapist
- None

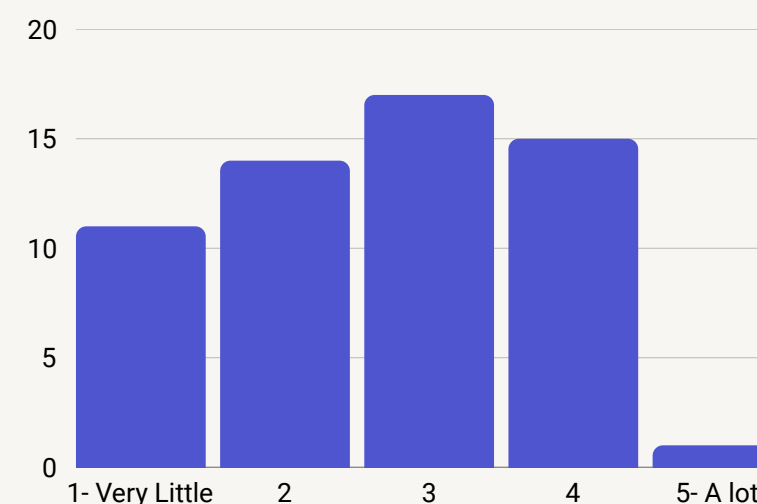
SATISFACTION WITH COMMUNICATION WITH SENIOR LEADERSHIP



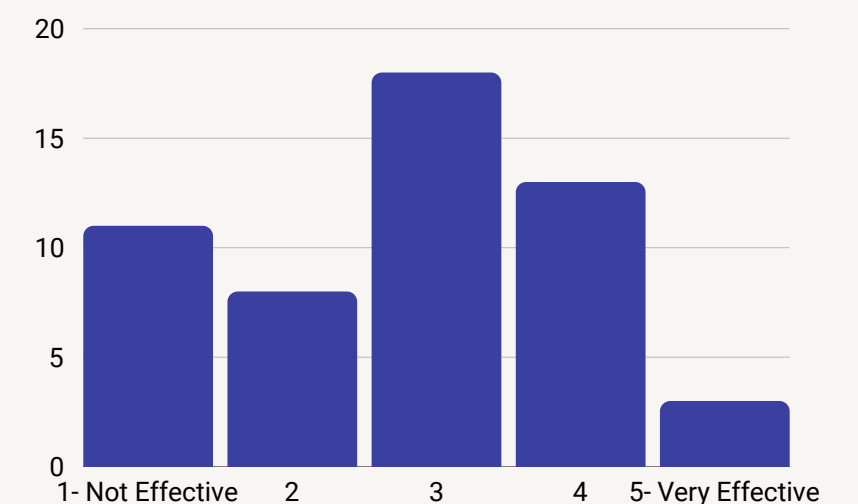
ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSPARENCY DURING CRISIS OR CHANGE



STAFF VOICE AROUND PROGRAM CHANGES OR DECISIONS



EFFECTIVENESS OF RESOURCES OFFERED



How do organizations currently respond to crisis and change?

“It has been my experience that [my organization] **doesn't really have many protocols in place** to respond to crisis or change effectively. It feels clandestine and obscure. This **breeds a sense of suspicion and mistrust** as well as **lowering moral** among front line workers.”

“Our organization **panics**, makes bold statements that frontline staff are forced to deal with regardless of the circumstances, and posts on social media like nothing is happening.”

“We tend to be more reactive than proactive once issues arise. There's a running joke that we tend to **'fly the plane and once we land, we go back to actually build it the right way.'**”

“**Information is siloed.** Senior leaders discuss with executives, who discuss amongst themselves and decide what, if anything, to communicate out.”

Suggestions from Staff Survey



Be proactive and plan ahead for crisis

Multiple staff described their organizations as “reactive” rather than proactive, and many reported being unfamiliar with their organizations’ crisis plans and procedures.



Clearer communication & increased transparency

Staff suggested roadmaps, visuals, and transparency around how decisions align with organizational values.

Staff would also like to see more frequent and discrete spaces to give feedback to senior leadership.



Increased accountability and investment in the work

Staff would like to see more senior leadership in the field supporting frontline staff, hopefully leading to more informed decision-making.

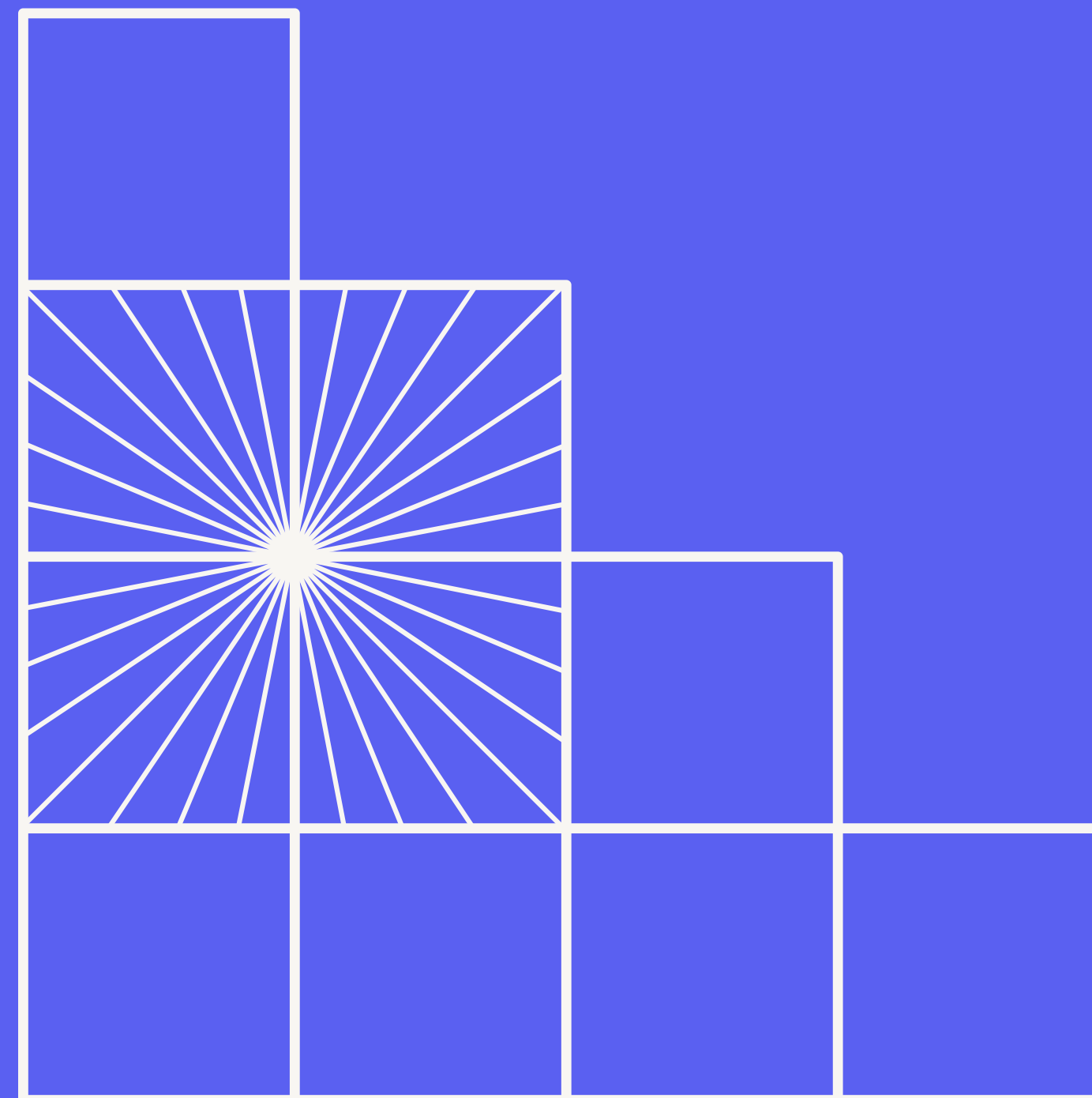
Staff also want to see all relevant parties consulted when decision-making.



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Best Practices in Times of Crisis and Change



7 Steps for Nonprofits to Manage Change and Crisis

- Organize and Prepare a Crisis Management Team
-

- Protect your Organization Financially
-

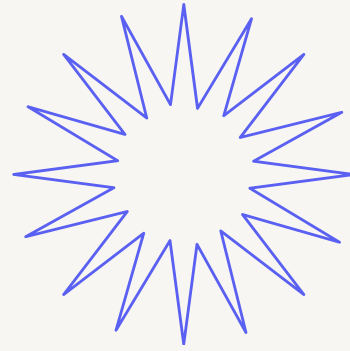
- Support Your People
-

- Facilitate Open Communication
-

- Build a Secure Infrastructure for Your Programs
-

- Reassess Your Risk Profile
-

- Be Adaptable
-

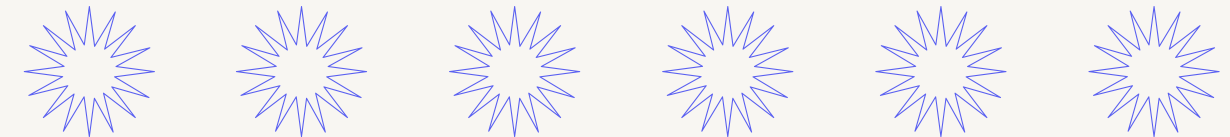


INTERNAL PROCESS

- Design Internal Process for Drafting & Approving Messaging Ahead of Time
- Develop Core Message
- Identify Essential Audiences & Best Way to Reach Them
- Select the Right Spokesperson to Deliver the Communication
- Create Contingency Plans (expect the unexpected)
- Partner with Experts as needed

INTERNAL COMMS TEAM

- Communications/Media Person
- Executive Director
- Legal Team/HR
- Board Members (at least 1 chair)



CORE MESSAGES

- Reflection of Nonprofit Core Values
- Leveraging Impact Stories
- Accept Responsibility and Take Accountability where Necessary
- Express Concerns for Those Affected By the Crisis

Support Your People

Employees Need and Want To Know



Know They Are Valued



Know They Are Cared For



Understand The Bigger
Picture And Where They Fit In

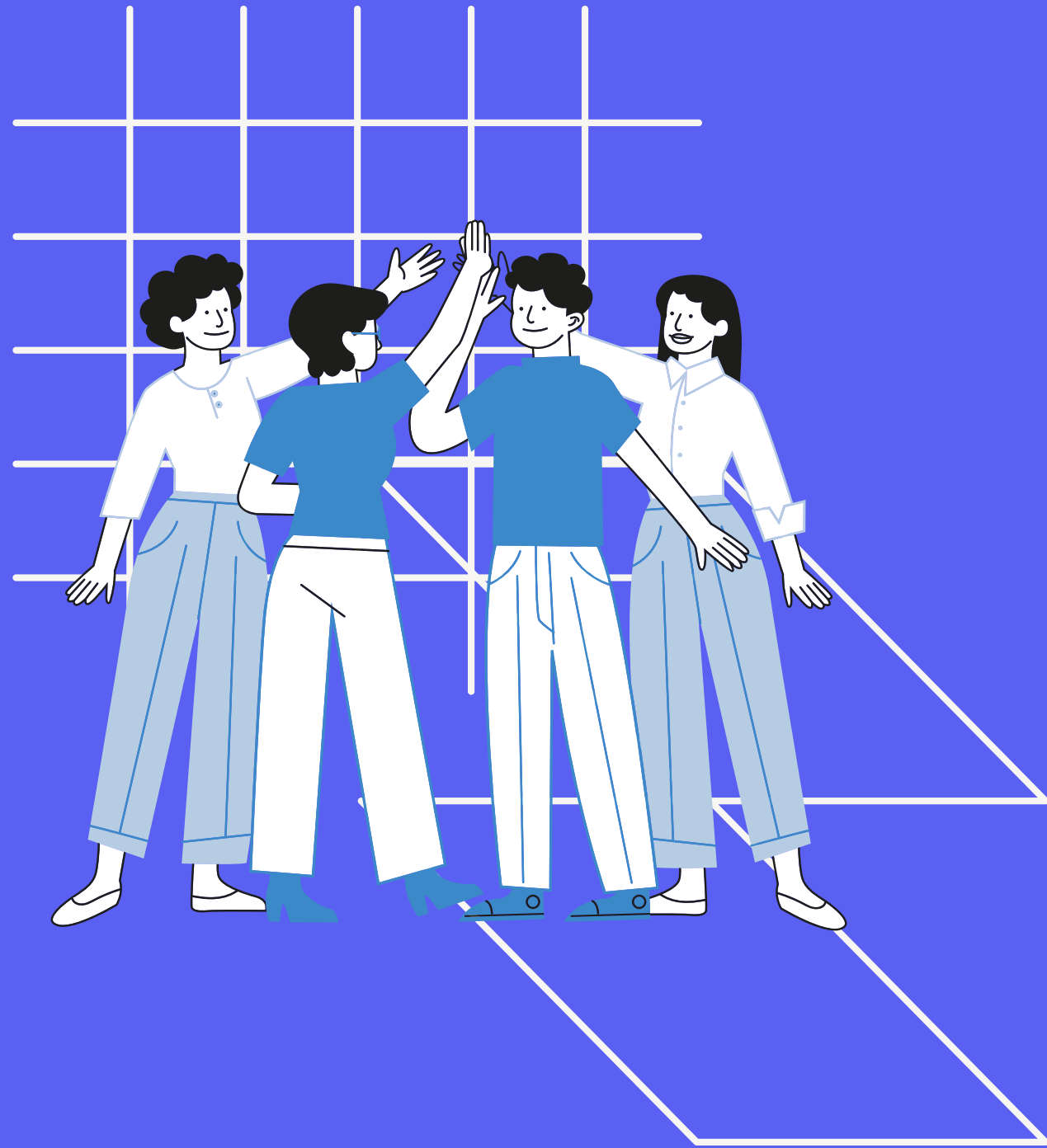


Know What To Do When
Something Happens



Understand The Who,
What, How and Why

Remember: Employees Are Your First Ambassadors



Navigating Honest Conversations During Crisis and Change

For senior leadership and management in a nonprofit, handling honest conversations with frontline staff during times of crisis and change is crucial for maintaining trust, morale, and alignment with the organization's mission. Here's how leadership can effectively navigate such conversations:

Navigating Honest Communication



Transparency

- Be open about the challenges the organization is facing. This includes providing clear, honest information about the crisis and any impending changes.
- Share the reasons behind decisions and the impact on the organization's future.



Active Listening

- In times of crisis and change, frontline staff may have concerns, fears, and questions. Leaders should be prepared to listen actively, acknowledging staff's feelings and perspectives.
- Create spaces for open dialogue, where staff feel comfortable expressing concerns without fear of retaliation.



Empathy and Support

- Acknowledge the emotional impact that a crisis or significant change may have on frontline staff, who may be directly dealing with the fallout or uncertainty.
- Offer emotional support, whether through professional counseling, additional resources, or personal encouragement.

Navigating Honest Communication



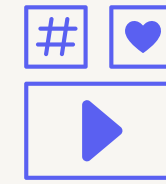
Clear Communication of Next Steps

- Staff will be looking for guidance. It's vital that senior leadership clearly communicates the next steps the organization will take and how it plans to address the crisis or navigate the change.
- Even if the full picture isn't available, it's important to communicate what is known and provide reassurance that decisions are being made thoughtfully.



Involve Staff in Problem - Solving

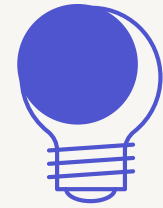
- Involving frontline staff in brainstorming and problem-solving can empower them, increase their engagement, and provide valuable insights from those closest to the organization's core work.
- Leaders should encourage collaboration and show that every staff member has a role in navigating through challenging times.



Consistency in Messaging

- Consistent messaging helps reduce confusion and anxiety. Senior leaders should ensure that all communications align and provide a unified message about the crisis or change.
- It's essential that this consistency is maintained across different channels (team meetings, one-on-ones, emails, etc.).

Impact



Productivity

Studies show that communicating effectively with employees can boost productivity by 20-25% ([McKinsey 2012](#)). Employees want to feel valued, motivated, and connected to the bigger picture.



Resilience

Honest conversations will help prepare staff for what's to come, which enables staff to respond to change with flexibility and resilience rather than resistance.



Retention

Clear communication increases trust, fosters a sense of security, and helps employees feel valued.



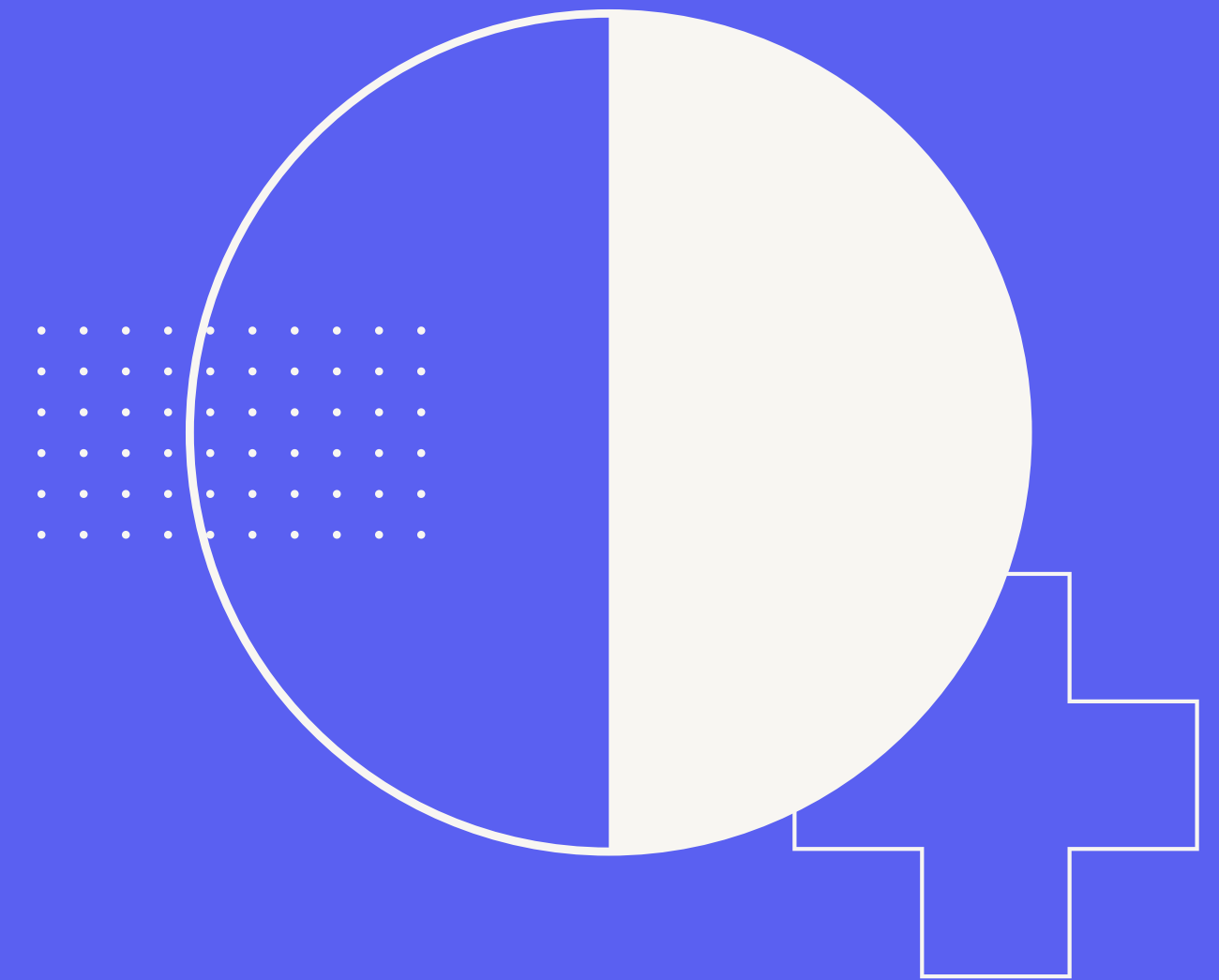
Alignment with Organizational Mission

Organizations aim to serve both their staff and their students/program participants. A culture of trust and transparency demonstrates an organization's dedication to its own mission and values.

Reflection Questions

- + Does your organization have formal processes to reflect on and learn from its successes and failures?
- + Are staff encouraged to share knowledge, lessons learned, and best practices across teams?
- + When mistakes are made, how are they treated by the organization?
- + Is there a culture of openness in your organization, where staff feel comfortable asking questions, sharing ideas, and challenging assumptions?

Leadership in the face of crisis is NOT about having all the answers but about guiding teams through uncertainty with a balanced approach of rational planning, open communication, empathy, and adaptability.





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Thank you!

Questions?

