Keeping a Business Flying when the Sky Is Falling

By Claire Sookman

Are you facing the challenge of doing more with less? Are you trying to improve productivity while lowering expenses? Is your business capable of surviving an economic crisis? Will you be able to manage your staff to not only weather the storm but to effectively return to "business as usual"? Hurricane Katrina gave us a "wakeup" call and taught some us valuable lessons. Now, with the state of the economy hanging over us like the sword of Damocles, the time to start thinking about things we'd rather not think about is, unfortunately, now.

How an economic nosedive will affect individual businesses varies. However, the potential hiring freeze, layoffs and restricted travel could certainly lead to kneecapped communications systems and a fragmented international work force; a devastating reality for many businesses.

Yet, with some foresight and careful planning, the worst storm can be weathered. "Virtual teams" offer a compelling way to offset potential risks. According to (Zigurs, 2003, Leadership in Virtual Teams) A virtual team is a collection of individuals who are geographically dispersed and who collaborate via communication and
information technologies in order to accomplish a specific goal.

How Virtual Teams Can Help
The economy is changing and successful companies are responding by investing in programs that will position them to maximize their human resource potential. By understanding how to manage people virtually you can lower expenses and improve your return on investment.

Smart planning and looking at creative alternatives can minimize the new reality of reduced travel, hiring freezes and budget reductions. **Virtual teams** is a life jacket for companies who want to do business as usual but do not have the travel budget to do it.

While virtual teams can't function without people, these teams are in a unique position to enable a get a business up and rolling when the lights do come back on. Since travel presents no issues or obstacles for virtual teams, all that is needed to reconnect the business is the technology and the virtual team skills.

The role played by managers is crucial and it goes without saying that they must have the highest level of training and expertise to weather this storm.

According to a recent study by the Institute for Corporate Productivity 77 per cent of the respondents said that offering virtual leadership development is important to very important yet more than a full 25 per cent of these organizations do not offer any training and development opportunities to improve their virtual leadership skills.

Communication has the greatest impact on the success of virtual teams and that leaders of virtual teams are justifiably concerned about the impact of unclear communication on productivity, efficiency and the bottom line.

Virtually The Same
Many argue that virtual teams are not as effective or as efficient as collocated teams. To them, face-to-face contact is important. However, what many fail to realize is that the benefits typically associated with face-to-face teams can be achieved more conveniently and at a fraction of the cost by using virtual teams. The delivery may differ, but the results are the same.

Tradition and Technology: the foundations of the Virtual Team
To be successful, virtual teams need to grasp the importance of frequent, open communication. Trying to duplicate the workings of a collocated team in a virtual environment was proving to be both frustrating and unproductive for many companies trying to make the leap. "Truth is that traditional teams and virtual teams face many of the same challenges. However, small problems that would pose a mere inconvenience to traditional teams can prove to be major hurdles for virtual teams." Understanding the "new dynamic" of the virtual world takes more than a bit of getting used to.

Meeting Planners Beware!
There are many benefits to conducting meetings and conferences virtually including cost saving, better work life balance, the ability to record your meetings so it is available for those who would like to access it at a later date and of course being able to offer the conference to people regardless of their geographic location. But there are also potential pitfalls if you don't take the necessary precautions. Let's look at two categories of challenges, the technology and keeping people engaged.

Technology

1. Be assured at one point the technology will fail so always have a back-up plan.
2. Have a technology person on the call so you can focus on conducting the meeting and they can focus on any technical glitches that may happen
3. Have an alternative call-in number available
4. Ensure participants understand how to use the technology
5. Confirm that the technology you are using is appropriate for the meeting you are having

Getting and Keeping People Engagement

1. Often we have meetings or conferences where some of the attendees are working from home while others are in the same room during the meeting. This can create a feeling of isolation for the team members who are working from home. Try to have everyone work remotely. If you are unable to do so make others who are outside of the main forum feel valued and involved
2. Establish a Team Operating Agreement (rules of engagement) for meeting behaviors and attach it to the meeting agenda.
3. Look for opportunities to verify that the person on the other end of the line is engaged and understood what was being discussed. A simple way to do this is to check in with people every 3 slides or every 10 minutes
4. Have multiple presenters. The change of voice and pitch can help keep people engaged
5. Be aware of myths that multi-tasking is more productive-it is not!
Whether you are a meeting planner or you are transitioning your team from being collocated to the virtual world many of the same obstacles will still be present but the rewards for your team and your organization are worth the effort.

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Claire Sookman, helps geographically dispersed teams work more effectively through training, coaching and consulting. To discover your teams top three challenges and receive a complementary needs assessment for your team email us at info@virtualteambuilders.com or call us at 1.866.497.7749.

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