

Leading into the Holidays: Prepare Your Business for the Holiday Season by Taking Some Tips from Captains

By Bob Garrow

When it comes to preparing for the holiday season, we can all take a few lessons from ship captains. For example, before setting sail, the captains of old would hold their own version of today's business planning sessions, discussing where they would sail, expected rules of conduct, what role each man was to play in the mission and how they would divide any treasure they found.

The same rules apply to today's leaders as they prepare their troops for the holiday season. For some businesses, the holidays are a hectic time during which they generate the major portion of their annual profits. In other organizations, the challenge is to maintain high business standards while many staff members are on vacation. Either way, the holiday season requires extra levels of commitment from each member of the team.

Following are some ways a team or organization leader can ensure smooth sailing throughout the season.

Before Setting Sail

An effective leader starts with an initial planning session, the goal of which is to build consensus around the following key points:

- The importance of the coming season to our customers and how we can make a positive impact on the lives of our customers during this season.
- The importance of the coming season to our bottom line, and how we can maximize the profitability of the season.
- How we can make this the best season ever for both our customers and ourselves.

Additional discussions need to focus on:

- The overall game plan/strategy for the season, including pricing, promotion and customer service decisions with agreement on how each team member is expected to support the strategies.
- Clear assignment of duties and deadlines.
- What additional resources—skills and/or people—are needed and how they will be obtained.
- Identification of likely obstacles to a successful season and plans to mitigate each obstacle.

What to Load Aboard

The management function kicks in with decisions such as, what extra operating and promotional supplies and inventory of products are needed. Call the bank and suppliers to confirm previously arranged extra inventory financing.

Next, put on the leadership hat and plan for the following:

- Treasure chests of humor. (People work hardest when they are having fun. Set a fun quotient each day. Arrange a signal for each fun occurrence. One organization rings a ship's bell each time its telemarketing people find themselves having fun. The patterns of fun and successful telemarketing sales are strikingly parallel.)
- Boatloads of goodwill. Build up a balance of goodwill by encouraging workers to be extra thoughtful towards each other as the peak season approaches. Create a culture where people learn to look out for one another.
- Safety for all hands. Will longer hours mean that staff members will be traveling home after dark or during non-peak hours? Brainstorm to find ways to eliminate any travel-related risks.
- No walking the plank. Support your people when the inevitable mistakes happen. Teach them to learn from each mistake. Avoid laying blame.
- Barrels of autonomy. Set clearly defined goals but let workers determine how to achieve the desired ends whenever possible.

Share the Treasures

During the holiday season you need everyone to perform at their best. Captains know that the more treasures they share with their crew, the more treasures they find! Modern day treasures to be shared include praise, recognition, respect, autonomy and the desire to be the best that they can be. Create awards to make heroes out of your people. Encourage every manager to recognize and reward extra effort and outstanding performance. Create a quota for praise and recognition. Begin or end each day with praise and be specific about what performance you are praising. Combine the praise with fun so that everyone enjoys the celebration.

We all enjoy doing what we do best. Give people the opportunity to employ their best skills. Ask their opinions on topics in which they have expertise.

What to Dump Overboard

Find a way to lighten the load during the holiday season. When possible, jettison activities that your colleagues dislike doing, perhaps by outsourcing them. Otherwise, find a way to inject some fun into them. Devise ways to do such tasks more quickly, or combine them with much more pleasurable tasks.

So, captain, get your entire crew on board to ensure a prosperous and happy holiday season for all. Thoughtful, innovative leadership will serve as your compass to make it so.

Author Bio:

Bob Garrow is a consultant who works with leaders to generate organizational missions, objectives and strategies. He can be reached at info@pirateleadership.com