



What I Learned



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Edited by Amy R. Partridge

We asked executives and business owners across Westchester to share reflections on their experiences during the COVID-19 crisis. Their inspiring words on how they dealt with the challenges posed by this global pandemic are rich and varied, but all show one thing: The business community here remains determined not to let a virus shut Westchester down for the long haul.

Rely on Your Team

The most important insight during this pandemic has been to recognize and appreciate the talents that other key members of your team possess, and to rely on their advice, shaping policy as a group. There is too much that can't be known by any one individual when we

1

are in uncharted waters; relying on gut instinct, or to take on the "ultimate leader decides everything" strategy, is foolish and potentially fatal. Further, experts do disagree, even when

they have equivalent credentials and experience. I have seen how critical it is to create policy blending the realities of public health, law, operational limitations, available finance, and the resources of manpower. No one thing prepares you for a moment like this. Perhaps, flexibility and adjustment to facts on the ground become the most valuable assets to possess.

—George Latimer
Westchester County Executive

Understand the Power of Alignment

During the pandemic, our team at Tompkins Mahopac Bank anticipated and received overwhelming demand for the vital Paycheck Protection Program and needed to quickly assemble a team of people to process, approve, document, and fund the loans to keep our local small businesses afloat. We immediately had a surplus of volunteers from our staff,

2

who, over the course of several weeks and weekends, worked around the clock to ensure that our customers did not get shut out of the limited government funding. To me, this demonstrated the power of having your team aligned along a clear company mission and the importance of articulating our values regularly to new and existing employees. This creates a company with a shared vision, united by a passionate and engaged team. To see the pride our employees took in serving

others and getting needed funds to customers during this difficult time was extremely gratifying.

—Gerald J. Klein Jr.
President and CEO,
Tompkins Mahopac Bank,
multiple locations

Be Ready for What's New

During difficult times, the role of business organizations becomes even more relevant. Businesses look to the BCW for information, connections, guidance, and opportunities; we had to be ready to immediately pivot to new roles. Resiliency was key. Our business community proved that we are all

3

able to adjust to new technologies, to working from home, and leading from a distance in new ways.... We have also seen companies start new lines of business during this time. Entrepreneurs can find meaningful new routes to meet the new needs.... Finally, the networks previously made have paid dividends. We were able to compare notes on regional, state, and national levels, to provide the most up-to-date resources for our members on all levels of business, government, and community.

—Marsha Gordon and
John Ravitz
President and CEO; Executive Vice
President; Business Council of
Westchester, Rye Brook

Support, Communicate, Thank, and Renew

This has been a time of both great challenge and wonderful inspiration.

The four principles that have helped us through this period are: First, support your staff by giving them the tools they need to do their jobs safely under unprecedented circumstances. With the right tools, their dedication will come through, and they

4

will figure things out you never could. Second, communicate. Tell people what is going on and what you can do and what you can't. In these situations, you cannot overcommunicate: People will welcome hearing from you frequently and frankly. Third, thank your staff. They are doing heroic work and need to know you recognize and appreciate that. Finally, take a break. No one can go full speed forever. After you have gotten through the deepest part of the crisis, take time for yourself and encourage your staff to do the same.

—Seth Diamond
CEO, Westchester Jewish Community
Services, Hartsdale

Serve Your Community

It takes a village to get through a pandemic; this crisis has reinforced the importance of community. As a leader, I have been able to reach out to my entire community to support the needs of students, families, and staff. The issues have been complex, but as a group, we are going to come out of this stronger. This crisis has also taught us more about our residents' needs and wants, and the need to use the strong relationships our different groups have to make sure we were able to get the information we need to our families and students.

5

—Dr. Raymond Sanchez
Superintendent, Ossining Union Free
School District

Always Do the Right Thing

As a business owner in this type of unprecedented situation, you have to do what's right. I made sure to connect with my team, to check on them and make sure they were doing okay physically and mentally. Same thing goes for my clientele: I checked in with

6

them, sent out emails to let them know how much we value them, and created an incentive for when they come back. I had all Meg-a-Lashes calls forwarded to my personal phone, and I tried not to miss a single call. I did the best I could to

answer any questions or concerns clients had and tried to be there for them as much as I possibly could. Also, I learned to stop stressing and let go of things you cannot control.

—Megan Ryan
Owner, Meg-a-Lashes,
Rye and White Plains

Make Strategic Decisions

The pandemic led me to a massive choice: Do I reopen my business when gyms are given the okay to open, or do I transform my services to meet the needs and conditions of the future? Ultimately, I chose to transition from my brick-and-mortar location to personal online fitness coaching, as well as small-group personal training out of Iron Health Physical Therapy in Peekskill. In this transition, I learned how important it is to be decisive, how important confidence is in making decisions, and how important the delivery of your decisions are — especially when customers and employees alike are in a fearful and vulnerable state. The leadership that it took to make and execute that decision successfully was crucial to keeping our community and culture thriving. We've maintained 50 percent of our members for online training and as potential members in Peekskill.

7

—Alina Pedraza
Owner, Fused Fitness, Peekskill

Share What You Know — and What You Don't

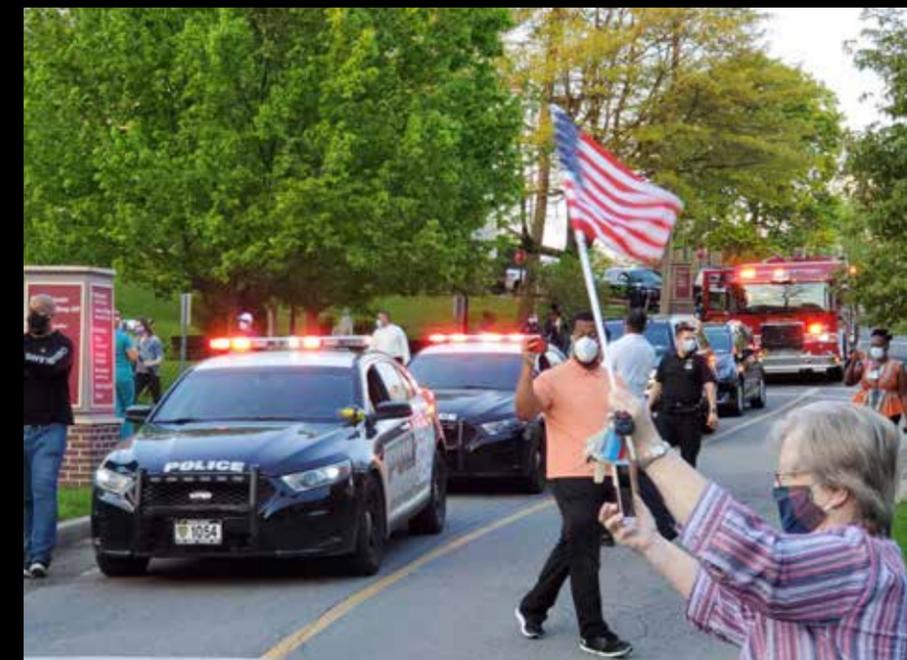
The first casualty in any emergency is information. In the beginning, we didn't know exactly what we were up against with this virus. The uncertainty was stressing everyone. People base their reactions on what people in roles like mine say, and they expect that their leaders and public officials know everything. It's very tempting to try to

8

meet that expectation. But it's important to tell people what you do know and what you don't know. By building that trust

Helping Hands

Businesses across Westchester came together to provide support, assistance, and gratitude for essential workers on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic. From donations of PPE and meals to parades to say thank you, the county's business, nonprofit, and government sectors stepped up to show their appreciation.



(Top to bottom) A tribute parade on May 15 in Mount Vernon, led by Mayor Shawyn Patterson-Howard, honoring the frontline workers at Wartburg, a healthcare-and-rehabilitation campus; COVID-19 antibody testing was provided to all Wartburg staff thanks to a partnership with The Mount Vernon Neighborhood Health Center.

Helping Hands, continued



(Top to bottom) Kings Capital Construction of Tarrytown donated and distributed more than 40,000 pounds of fresh produce with the help of White Plains mayor Tom Roach; Tompkins Excavating donated a truck and driver to help Feeding Westchester meet its increased demand for food deliveries.



and rapport through honesty, you're recruiting them and educating them and helping them understand when to have concerns. That can only happen if you're honest with your audience. Building trust has to be a philosophy, not just one event. Everything works better when you have open lines of communication.

—**Dr. Sherlita Amler**
Commissioner, Westchester County
Commissioner of Health

Lean In

One of the most important guiding principles for me during the COVID-19 crisis has been something I learned as a runner: to lean in. Our basic instinct is to slow down during an uphill because it hurts and to pace ourselves during the downhill because it's too easy to lose control. But, indeed, the only way to have impact, to make a difference, is to embrace the chaos and lean into it. For me and my team, that meant working seven days a week and being flexible when new challenges or opportunities arose. The result was us being able to help tens of thousands of people in our community weather the impact of this crisis.

—**Tom Gabriel**
President and CEO, United Way of
Westchester and Putnam, Hartsdale

Always Be Prepared

We knew it before, but the coronavirus brought it home: always be prepared for a crisis. Of course, no organization could have fully anticipated the impact of this novel coronavirus. But over the years, we have drilled for various emergencies and that served us well during the sudden onset of COVID-19. We didn't panic because we had emergency plans. Our staff was nimble. We had structure in place to immediately implement intensive training on virus protocols. We were able to go above and beyond what was expected in terms of health, safety, and communication. Being prepared gave us the freedom to develop new skillsets needed because

of this crisis — in technology, virtual communication, and creative programming for our residents. While crises are transient, organizational culture is not. Ours is one of compassion and collaboration, and that worked to our advantage.

—**Rita Mabli**
President and CEO, United Hebrew,
New Rochelle

Teamwork Is Tops

Navigating this crisis was very hard in the beginning, but we decided to stay open, and that made our team even closer, like a family. We learned how important community is — and we proudly provided many meals to local first responders, who were so grateful. We learned to appreciate every single guest even more and are so thankful for the love and support they showed to our restaurant during these challenging times. We also learned how to pivot our business and quickly create new offerings to support our establishment, such as virtual cooking classes, special promotions, such as our seafood night, an online gift shop with wonderful gift baskets, and more. These learnings will all certainly stay with our team for the long haul.

—**Zarak Matija**
General Manager, Dubrovnik
Restaurant, New Rochelle

Strategic Staffing Is Key

I could not be prouder of our teams at NewYork-Presbyterian Hudson Valley Hospital and Medical Group. As challenging and daunting as this has been, our frontline caregivers and medical staff were selfless in their willingness to re-deploy to other areas — places they had never worked before — in order to help their colleagues care for critically ill patients. And the thoughtful planning and strategizing of our multidisciplinary leadership team enabled us to create the additional capacity that was needed for our patients. I am grateful for this dedicated

team of heroes here at the hospital and for the tremendous support from NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital.

—**Stacey Petrower**
President, NewYork-Presbyterian
Hudson Valley Hospital,
Cortlandt Manor

Take Advantage of Downtime

We took advantage of the "pause" to get our field employees trained and certified for several safety classes, including OSHA30, and encouraged all of them to do online educational training to enhance their professional development. We also had several executive team meetings to evaluate and improve our policies and procedures. As a leader, I regularly communicated with our employees via video meetings, and I sent video announcements to put a human touch on information sharing, instead of emails. We also assembled a group of employees to volunteer for the United Way of Westchester and Putnam to help set up and deliver food in Putnam and Northern Westchester Counties. By keeping our company together, communicating with each other, and bonding over helping the local community, our organization is closer and stronger than it ever has been.

—**Bud Hammer**
President, Atlantic Westchester,
Bedford Hills

Get Lean

During the COVID-19 crisis we have learned, as an incidental but very welcome benefit, how to become leaner and more efficient in many of our processes and procedures. For example, we have substantially streamlined and automated many of our communications processes, from ingoing/outgoing mail to document exchanges with other attorneys and medical providers. This has allowed us to spend more time on core substantive work on behalf of our clients.

Also, our firm has taken advantage of this unusual time to finally take on the important, big-picture projects that never

14

seemed to make their way off the back burner. The extra time while being on pause has provided us the opportunity to rethink the firm top to bottom and bot-

tom to top, to gain perspective and to figure out what we are doing right and what we could be doing better. Perhaps most importantly, we have refined the responsibilities and goals of everyone at the firm, lawyers and staff alike, to ensure that everyone knows what is expected of them on a day-to-day basis, without the need — or, for that matter, the ability right now — to have someone peering over their shoulder.

—**Daniel G. Ecker**
Attorney and Partner,
Lever & Ecker, PLLC, White Plains

Make It Timely

The biggest thing we learned during the COVID-19 crisis was the importance of timely action and communication. Immediately when the crisis started, Tarrytech designed and executed a work-at-home plan for our team. Establishing our home offices early allowed us to stay safe and efficiently address the rush of support requests from our clients

15

setting up their home offices. In addition, Tarrytech was in front of the curve in communicating our plans and status with our clients. This helped assure stability and confidence in having us as their technology partner when our support was critical to their operations. Communication with our team over the past few months has been important, as well. We hosted several virtual happy hours and online games to keep our team connected and engaged. Tarrytech also leveraged the professional organizations to which we belong; these organizations provided tremendous insight, knowledge, support, and direction for our company, enabling us to fully service our clients, maintain the health of our team, and pivot our business for success in the COVID-19 landscape.

—**James Kudla**
President, Tarrytech,
Elmsford