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Managing multiple locations doesn't have to be daunting

'Long-distance relationships' simply require more care and attention.

By Tim Smith, Principal

A long-time client of mine has a new position that involves managing multiple offices.

It's a great opportunity but a big change from her previous job, which centered on overseeing the day-to-day operations of a single facility. She's now dealing with frequent travel, the difficulty of long-distance communication, entire staffs who don't know her and a whole host of other challenges.

My client's experience started me thinking about the struggle managers face once their businesses grow beyond their initial locale. While expansion is certainly a worthwhile goal, the obstacles can be daunting when you finally open new outlets or acquire additional facilities.

The key to success is to recognize the unique requirements of multiple locations and adapt your management focus accordingly. The nine tips listed below work for any business – but they pay especially handsome dividends for managers of multiple locations.

1. Share the big picture – often

Everyone knows that employees crave information that makes their jobs meaningful. That's even more important the farther they are from headquarters. So make sure you share the big picture with employees at every company location, and do so on a regular basis.

What are the company's strategies, goals, objectives? What changes are in the works? How will those changes affect this location? How will those changes affect specific people at each location? How do location-specific changes tie to the big picture?

Answering these questions often – through face-to-face or written communications – helps employees understand what the company is trying to accomplish and how their individual efforts contribute to that goal. Most important, it ensures that folks across the



Communication becomes even more critical when you manage multiple locations. Share the 'big picture' often and get to know your managers personally.

company stay focused on the direction and goals of the entire organization.

2. Develop your location manager

Your onsite manager is oh-so-important to the location's success.

He or she must be able to run the facility without close supervision – managing people, money, inventory, customer service and more.

Most companies fill new management slots with people who have proven their expertise in operations or sales. But there is a big difference between doing a functional job well and managing an entire location.

It's important that you recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the individual you select to manage an off-site facility, and make certain that you provide training and support to sharpen those skill sets that are missing.

Let's look at an example.

You open a satellite operation in another state, and promote your best salesperson to lead the office.

Your candidate may have perfected a system for generating sales, but is he capable of leading a team?

Can he collaborate with coworkers, keep people informed, listen to other viewpoints? Does he make well-informed decisions, make those decisions objectively, and take responsibility for his actions? Has he demonstrated the ability to develop people? Can he constructively harness and guide the energies of others? Is he comfortable with change and able to lead others through change? Is he focused on the needs of the customers, and not just a sale? Is he able to establish and follow plans? Can he foster teamwork and positive relations both within the location and between the location and other locations?

That's a long list of questions, but they are necessary ones to ask of the people you consider to run your facilities.

3. Set clear expectations

Clearly define for your managers the performance standards and goals that you've set for the organization as a whole. And work with them individually to establish objectives for their particular

location – including both financial and operational performance measures.

Once these expectations are established, review actual results on a regular basis – either monthly or quarterly – and require the manager to develop, communicate and implement plans for closing the gap between actual performance and the standards that have been set.

Make sure that your managers know that simply maintaining acceptable performance is not enough. A good leader routinely makes improvements that show up in performance measurements as reduced costs, increased profit, increased efficiency, higher sales, improved customer satisfaction, etc.

The bottom line is that regular evaluation and follow-up are critical. Overtly evaluating current performance and improvements tells the manager what you deem important.

4. Establish best practices

You can support each of your locations by developing standard operating and training procedures and sharing best practices. Put a system in place that lets facilities quickly and easily share new ideas or suggestions for improvements. Encourage your managers to communicate with one another – it doesn't make sense to "re-invent the wheel" at each location.

5. Deal with problems quickly

Don't let problems fester. Deal with them quickly and directly. But make sure you get all the facts. It can be easy to make assumptions about what's happening at another location, especially when something goes wrong.



Review actual results for all locations at least quarterly.

6. Include people at remote locations in decision-making

In many companies, non-headquarters staff members frequently complain that decisions are just "thrown over the wall."

When commands come down from on high without input from people across the organization, it makes employees feel even more disconnected. And often those decisions have negative consequences since they were made in a vacuum. Involve your off-site employees in decision-making and do so in person, if possible.

7. Build the relationship

One reason you work well with people in your local office is that you see each other often and know each other personally.

That's a lot more difficult when your company grows. You have to make an effort to get to know people at other locations.

Doing so is especially critical because off-site managers and employees need to know that they have support from the head office. And they need to feel a close-enough tie to seek out feedback and collaboration even though they aren't right next door.

But good working relationships require trust – and trust comes from familiarity. To build an in-depth relationship with your managers, proactively communicate with them as frequently as possible, and be open and accessible when they need guidance or someone to listen.

Invest your time in building the relationship with all of your location managers and staff and you'll see improvement in decision-making and performance. And by getting to know your managers personally, you'll respond better to their individual personalities and work styles. The best way to accomplish this is to follow No. 8 below.

8. Stay in touch

Visit your locations regularly, and don't just go there to work. Include some time to visit and socialize. Have a regular schedule and keep to it. The routine adds stability. Make frequent calls, too, even if just to check in.

E-mail is great for some forms of communication, but don't rely on it for anything that's sensitive. Not only is e-mail impersonal, but it allows too much room for interpretation.

9. Use technology

Employ technology to facilitate communication and share information efficiently. While you do want to ensure good results, stay informed, build relationships between the location and other locations, including "the main office," you don't want to overload your location manager with a lot of administrative work.

Technology helps do these things efficiently.

Share your experiences

Do you have any tips or suggestions for managers responsible for multiple locations?

We'd love to hear from you.

Send your thoughts to tim@plaidgroup.com and we'll include the best suggestions in our next newsletter.

Don't let the distance scare you

Organizational growth that requires additional locations doesn't have to be a difficult step. In fact, the benefits often far outweigh the additional effort that is required.

Managers that focus on building relationships, facilitating communication, developing a common culture and setting corporate and site-specific objectives find that managing multiple locations can be a rewarding, positive experience. And the additional revenue and profits aren't bad, either!

More Information? If you'd like to learn more about managing multiple locations, please send an E-mail to tim@plaidgroup.com, visit our web site at www.plaidgroup.com, or call us at 713-627-3569. The Plaid Group publishes a free bimonthly e-mail newsletter filled with insights and ideas you can use to enhance your company's operational performance, spur growth and increase bottom-line profits. To subscribe, change your e-mail address or unsubscribe, please visit www.plaidgroup.com/newsletters_subscribe.asp.

Author's Note: **Tim Smith** is a Principal with The Plaid Group. The Plaid Group helps companies simplify and stabilize their business operations to improve financial performance and gain a competitive edge.