

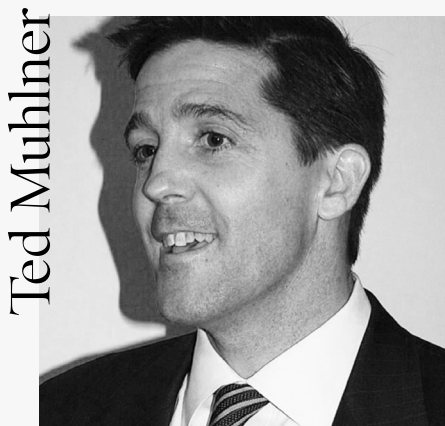
THE POWER OF THE COLLECTIVE

HISTORY, REVISITED: WHAT PAST CRISES CAN TEACH
US ABOUT BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE RECOVERY STRATEGY



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Hospitality is an industry attuned to weathering crises – from 9/11 to the 2008 financial crash – and the second episode of our digital series asked travel veterans, Nancy Novogrod, Emily Snyder and Ted Muhlner to reflect on how lessons from past shocks can help us shape a robust post-COVID recovery strategy in the months ahead. Here are five lessons in leading through a crisis – class is now in session.

01.

Move beyond reality.

History shows us that when a crisis hits, stagnation invariably follows; paralysed by the status quo or fear of doing the wrong thing, businesses do nothing at all. But “doing nothing is the greatest risk of all,” Ted warns. “(Better to) fail fast than to sit back. Give yourself the opportunity to make changes.”

Stagnation is the enemy of effective recovery, so maintain momentum and become adept at making quick decisions with imperfect data. Ted’s previous experience as a Navy SEAL heavily impacts his approach to crisis management; while none of us have all the answers at the moment, he argues it’s paramount to “process the facts in a helpful way that allows business to move forward”.



02.

Flexibility is your friend.

This is not the time for gatekeeping, immovable cancellation policies or smokescreens, and all three speakers were impressed by the intra-industry collaboration and transparency we’ve seen in recent weeks, citing Wynn sharing their plans for reopening with the wider travel community as “historic.” “In past crises, there wasn’t this leniency,” surmised Emily. “These days, our competitors are friends.”

This flexibility should extend to your customers, too. All agreed that a flexible cancellation policy is the minimum standard for hotels and DMCs to meet. “Every week, we look (at our policy) and adjust it – it’s brand damaging to be strict about these things,” warned Emily.

03.

Creativity is a team pursuit.

Empower every person on your team to make creative decisions, from board-level shareholders to junior execs and interns. “You’re only as strong as your weakest link,” Ted argued, so think of your business as a family structure where everyone has an important role to play. Post-9/11, while managing the Ritz-Carlton Central Park in Manhattan, Emily assembled every member of her team to future plan, from front-of-house and kitchen staff to corporate sales reps. “By the end of 2002,” she says, “we were where we needed to be.”

This collaborative approach was seen at the government level as well, with Mayor Bloomberg successfully enlisting the efforts of several global PR agencies to invite shopping and tourism back to New York City following the 2008 financial crash.



04.

Dreams can translate into bookings.

Keep your clients inspired and engaged throughout this period, but don’t sell your product – sell the dream. People might not be travelling right now, but they’re certainly crafting future plans, so create airtight safety policies, make your customers aware of them, and don’t disappear. You never know where your next client could come from – the discussion leaders cited a travel agent’s recent impromptu Zoom cocktail party that garnered several future bookings. Domestic travel is likely to recover first and fastest, so focus your attention there. Can you work with local tourism boards or national parks to stimulate domestic travel? And if you own or market for a resort or retreat, now is the time to push the benefits of solo or crowd-free trips.

05.

Recovery is a marathon, not a sprint.

Taking action now will reap big rewards as we take tentative steps towards recovery, but consistency is crucial. “Get everyone (in your business) to communicate with the same tongue,” advises Emily. When trying to get new business on the books, start small. If the signs are there, create a ‘staycation’ package for your hotel, reaching out to local community partners from yoga studios and restaurants, to museums and galleries. Don’t implement panicked plans for short-term gains as some have done after past events, such as drastically lowering your rates or offering ill-planned discounts; our discussion leaders’ corporate clients have universally advised against this. As much as you can, work on keeping your business agile and responsive. “Be open to frequent changes,” offered Ted. Travel may never look quite the same, but this may not be a bad thing.