

How to keep a cool business head in the midst of a global pandemic



By [Wouter Vermeulen](#)

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Air France KLM general manager South Africa, Wouter Vermeulen shares the struggles the airline has experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic and some valuable lessons for other businesses navigating the crisis.

While many global industries have ground to a standstill in the face of the prevailing pandemic, the travel and tourism industry is one of the hardest-hit as most international borders have closed to travellers, in a bid to stop the transmission of Covid-19.

IATA numbers indicate that the global capacity, the number of seats flown, is down globally -80% on originally scheduled – and the fact that the remaining 20% capacity is not anywhere near load factors of pre-corona time, presents an existential threat for the entire airline industry.

Speaking from an airline perspective – and I know there are many other industries which find themselves in a similar situation, across the board – we have plenty of sunken operational costs to consider.

These sunken costs do not disappear when you stop operating – and with no real end in sight, we need to find ways to deal with continuing to operate our business until travel is possible, once more.

The situation boils down to this: everyone at Air France KLM needs to do everything they can to limit our expenses and do everything possible to ensure the future of our airline.

We do what we think is best, based on the limited information available – in a context that changes on a daily basis.

During this crisis there are many lessons learnt that might aid other businesses navigating the uncertainty.



Wouter Vermeulen

Communicate clearly

For me, the most important thing in ensuring a business makes the right decisions is for everyone to have as much information as possible. When it comes to our team, I am as open as possible in my communication with them – I tell them what I know from my discussions with our international operations and the South African government and I share my thoughts about the way forward.

It is important to project a realistic picture and for everyone to have as much clear, relevant information at their disposal as possible, to enable them to make informed suggestions and decisions.

It is also essential to put the decisions taken by the South African government in context for them and outline how these decisions impact operations. While it is an incredibly dramatic decision for us to have to suspend operations in South Africa, I support the way the government has approached the situation.

It is also vital to ensure you are clear with your team; that they should never assume anything and that there is no limit on

the number of times to ask a question to make sure they are crystal-clear on what is required of them, so that they can continue to work productively together.

Be proactive

Finding ways to be proactive during this crisis in whatever way you can in your respective industry, is valuable, and can contribute positively to any crisis situation.

What we have worked hard to establish is that, while passenger flights are suspended, we can still add value in terms of flying cargo in and out of South Africa to provide food, equipment, pharmaceuticals and other essential goods to the country and others in our global network, to help out with the pandemic. Addressing these issues is important, because we believe that we are still able to provide vital assistance, which helps our business, other businesses and millions of people.

We found that there were thousands of vitally-important COVID-19 test kits sitting at warehouses in Europe that had been ordered by labs in South Africa, but that there was no way of getting them here, under the original travel ban. We worked hard with our Embassies and associates to get the message across that we were ready to help - but that we needed to change the operating restrictions to be able to do so. Our engagement with the authorities allowed us to resolve to continue with cargo flights and facilitate safe stays for our crews in the country to allow for turn-around.

Be flexible

No two days during this crisis have been the same. Being flexible in these circumstances is essential.

The constantly-changing rules and regulations have taught me to prepare myself to let go of days of planning at a moment's notice. We have experienced changes in the rules just hours before a long-planned flight was due to depart, with a massive international logistical and communications ripple-effect. I've woken up every day with the mentality that I would possibly need to let go of everything we'd planned and start again, with renewed levels of enthusiasm.

I've found huge satisfaction in remaining pragmatic, being resourceful and finding ways to make things happen, no matter the obstacle. By being persistent and determined, we have been able to play our role in a massive repatriation effort that was ultimately executed safely and perfectly, under the most trying conditions we've ever seen.

Be considered

To date, Air France KLM has been able to operate four repatriation flights from South Africa, returning 1079 people including 6 infants to their homes before Easter in a joint effort involving the French and Dutch Embassies – and we have plans to operate two more.

The logistics involved in this operation were staggering, taking into account not only communicating with all the passengers, but also in terms of working within Civil Aviation guidelines, lockdown restrictions and legislation in our home countries. Not only was it tough to secure permission to operate the flights, but our team also then had to work incredibly hard to find ways to operate them securely taking into account a rapidly-shifting lockdown legislative framework and solving for conflicting rules.

After finding most doors closed to us in terms of setting up a safe hub to allow us to rotate crews to allow the log flight between Europe and South Africa to take place, we eventually managed to negotiate space with the government in La Reunion island, in close co-operation with the French Embassy. Without their willingness to assist – within the strictest safety protocols – we would never have been able to help more than 1 000 people return home.

Be patient

Dealing with the constantly-shifting rules would have been challenging if a team were able to sit together in an office and

work through them, but not being able to do so under lockdown has made it even more difficult.

The result of this is that we've had to shorten communications lines and avoid parallel communications to ensure that there's no confusion. Leaders within an organisation should endeavour to make things simple and straightforward, giving everyone a sense of what's important, what's urgent and what they can influence. It's also important to recognize what's out of your hands – and why you should worry about what you can influence, rather than what you can't.

Final thoughts are that under normal operations, everyone on the team knows what to do – there's a rhythm to the work. There's music and everyone knows the dance – but when the music stops, they need to have someone there to pick up the steps and set the pace again.

That should be a key part of any business leader's role, right now. I hope these few tips will help leaders in their respective companies and industries. In going forward in this uncertain environment, I am committed to dealing with and guiding my team through the challenges that the 'new normal' will bring, contributing to the recovery of the South African economy and the longevity and success of the Air France KLM group.

ABOUT WOUTER VERMEULEN

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