

Cutting through the chaos: Humber business leaders reveal how they cope with the Covid-led perfect storm

Entrepreneurs from across the region shared their experience of how to survive and thrive during the pandemic and beyond as they gathered at Humber Business Week.

Professor David Hall, who describes himself as a 'business helper' with a career spanning more than 40 years, brought in proven leaders to present their own case studies of succeeding in chaos.

Opening the event, he said: "I can remember some very hard times such as inflation and the banking crisis but I can never remember as many things coming together at once as we have now.

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"It's almost like a tsunami of things that have hit businesses, and it's ongoing, but we want to look at the positive side and look at what can be done about it. What are other businesses doing about it that maybe we can take something from? That's the purpose of this – that maybe people can come away with some ideas and motivation."

Brexit uncertainty and then the impact was overlapped by the economy-shattering arrival of Covid, bringing stifling measures the likes of which have not been seen by generations. The Russian invasion of Ukraine as the country's restrictions eased, has seen a cost of living crisis for the consumer, while supply chain issues, inflation and uncertainty hit

business.

Rob Daysley, managing director of Designs Signage Solutions, told of the importance of belief and consistency as he led his team through the challenges.

He told how a request from the NHS to keep a small team together to work on livery for ambulances enabled him to furlough some staff but also keep working, maintain consistency and take the opportunity to think during the pandemic.



Prof David Hall, Dr Paul Sewell and Rob Daysley at the MKM Stadium, Hull.

(Image: Ascough Associates Media and Public Relations)

He said: "A key element was the unwavering belief that you

would get to the other side. You also had to be brutal, honest and make the right decisions for the business. I tried to be consistent in my mood so people understood where I was coming from and the position I was in.

“We are okay now. A friend spoke to me at the beginning of the pandemic about the need to ‘survive, emerge and thrive’. We have emerged, we haven’t quite got to thrive yet but it’s coming.”

Rob urged the audience to “get round other people who are in this room, talk to people who are in the same position and understand the challenges we have.”

Entrepreneurs within the audience added their stories of launching businesses, making fundamental changes to the way they work and looking forward to implementing some of the ideas aired at the event.

Paul Sewell, chair of Sewell Group and a co-founder of Humber Business Week, highlighted key entrepreneurial attributes within the business that came to the fore when the pandemic hit.

He spoke of the importance of leadership, culture and mindset – and of the need for first-rate internal communications.

“We have been on leadership training for 20 years and one thing we did do was promote females to top positions and we really benefited from that during the chaos. If you only get command and control at the top you get passivity lower down and you don’t want that in a crisis.

“You either have a strong culture going into the crisis or you haven’t. You won’t discover it going through there. I was humbled and heartened about the way our people looked after each other – not management looking after them, they looked after each other.

“We made it very personal in the pandemic. I sat and recorded two or three personal messages. People who I knew were living on their own I rang and told them I was more worried about their personal wellbeing than the profitability of the business. Get personal, get it to the team, get it to the whole organisation but tell the truth because people prefer that.

“You get paid to make big decisions and there are bigger decisions in a crisis and chaos than there are when things are going smoothly so don’t procrastinate or disappear under the duvet – make those big decisions.”

From the audience, Matt Dass, managing director of Hull’s Eon Visual Media and [Springfield Solutions](#), revealed that trusting his workforce delivered significant growth.

He said: “We knew if we could get through the pandemic with healthy people we would be a healthy business. We have now moved everybody who can work from home onto working from home contracts and we have added some flexibility to that.

“It comes down to trust and what we have seen is that our productivity go up considerably. Between both businesses we have grown by 30 per cent over the two years and increased our head count from 85 to 120.”

Martin Lauer, founder and chief executive of Hessle’s The One Point Ltd, told how language was changed within the business, with leader swapping out manager.

“Manager suggests someone is coping, and we have leaders at every level,” he said.

Hearing experiences was appreciated. Mark and Toni Watson of Cottingham-based Key Green Properties said they were impressed by the panel and the contributions from the guests.

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Toni said: “Everything they spoke about today can be adapted to any type of business. It was brilliant.”

Mark added: “For me it was the transferrable takeaways that are relevant to businesses and personally. How I act in business is similar to how I act as a father. A lot of the things resonated for me and especially getting on with things when the chips are down and your back is against the wall.”

Chris Whitelock, chair of Hull-based Pure Renewables, said he will suggest changes within his business as a result. “It was incredibly helpful. There were some real gems in there which I am definitely going to take back to the senior management team – and rename them senior leadership team!”

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