

BACK TO BUSINESS

Seahawk business leaders tell us about their Covid 'new normal'

IT'S BEEN A TOUGH COUPLE OF YEARS for everyone, including business leaders. To find out how business has fared through the pandemic, and how it's coming — carefully — back to life, we talked with three Wagner College alumni who are leaders in three very different fields of business.

Jeff Forchelli '66 is firm chairman and co-managing partner of Forchelli Deegan Terrana LLP, a Long Island-based law firm specializing in complex real estate and land-use matters.

Bob Sappio '82 is CEO of SeaCube Container Leasing, an international company with headquarters in New Jersey.

Lisa Bennett '85 is communications chief for Total Rewards, the organization within JPMorgan Chase & Co. that handles employee benefits for its 250,000 associates worldwide.

Despite the huge differences in their industries, what surprised us most were the similarities in how Covid affected their operations and their employees, and how they are coming to grips with the pandemic's current stage.



Jeff Forchelli

'STAY POSITIVE, TEST NEGATIVE'

IN 1976, WHEN JEFF FORCHELLI started the law firm of Forchelli Deegan Terrana, he was just 10 years out of college. Today, the firm employs a total of 120 people out of its Uniondale, N.Y. offices.

Last March, when everything shut down, the situation was challenging, Jeff said.

"Everything is cash flow," he said. "Once your income stream stops, you're going down fast. And with the courts closed ...

"The solution was, we had to keep going as a firm and keep producing work," Jeff said, "and to do that,

we had to be the coach for our partners. And we encouraged them to encourage their employees, and to stay in touch with their clients.”

Jeff’s firm was very lucky. Three months before the shutdown, they had upgraded all of their computer systems.

“When it hit,” he said, “we had enough capacity for everyone to work from home.”

Through the summer of 2020, there were only five or six people working out of his office — “essential workers” — having lunch delivered every day in a paper bag.

“That summer I had a quote at the end of all my emails,” he said: “Stay positive — test negative.”

As things began gearing back up in the fall, people gradually started returning to the office.

“We set up a reopening committee,” Jeff said, “that watched the reports on the science to keep people as safe as possible.

“Our policy now is, if you’re not vaccinated, you have to get tested every week.”

‘ALMOST PANDEMIC-PROOF’

BOB SAPPPIO RUNS AN international company that leases shipping containers.

“The company is 25 years old. We have six offices around the globe,” he said, “with nearly \$4 billion in assets under management — and we do it all with less than 100 people.”

Unlike businesses whose activity was throttled during the Covid shutdown, SeaCube Container Leasing actually added business in 2020.

“We were almost pandemic-proof,” Bob said. “Most of our containers are refrigerated. When the economy shifted from buying experiences to buying stuff, consumer goods ... well, everyone still had to eat.”

SeaCube has emerged cautiously from the pandemic.

“We’re not requiring people to be vaccinated,” Bob said. “If you are, we’re requiring proof of vaccination



Bob Sappio

— and then there’s no restrictions to your movements in the company.

“If you are not vaccinated, that’s your choice — however, we’re asking that you wear a mask, practice good CDC guidance and get tested regularly.”

WHEN THE CDC SNEEZED ...

AMONG THE THREE alums we spoke with, Lisa Bennett is the executive whose responsibility is most directly tied to helping the employees of her company, the banking firm of JPMorgan Chase, navigate their way through the pandemic — especially because of the nature of their business.



Lisa Bennett

When governments began shutting down their economies last March, there were exemptions for essential workers and critical industries. Banking was one of those critical industries — and Lisa Bennett’s job as communications chief for the human resources operation of one of the world’s largest banks placed her squarely in the middle of the pandemic-management business.

“I’m responsible for 250,000 people worldwide,” she said. “Seventy thousand of them are in the U.S. Our question is, how do we stay on top of the changes throughout the pandemic that our employees need to know about?

“Every time the CDC sneezes,” she jokes, “we pull out a hanky.”

As of July 6, Chase corporate employees were all back to working in their offices around the country.

“We are not requiring vaccination,” Lisa said, “but we are requiring employees to input a status. If they are vaccinated, they have to upload a copy of their card. Or they can tell us if they are not vaccinated. Or they can tell us that they choose not to tell us — but they have to tell us something.”

The challenges are myriad — but Wagner alumni are helping their businesses make their way through them. ■