



Positive Pivoting

Getting Back to Normal by Getting Back to Basics

- Rick Biddle

We at RS&S recently worked with Michele Smith and the Woodland Park Zoo (WPZ) team to outsource their food service and catering operations. We were wowed by her spirited management approach, so we reached out to her to discuss some of the strategies she and her team are employing to keep WPZ moving forward. We are pleased to share them with you here:

Michele Smith, the CFO of the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle, knows a thing or two about returning to normalcy after a cataclysmic event: she worked for United Airlines on 9/11. Getting through that devastating experience instilled in her a practical, action-oriented guiding philosophy that has roared into action as she helps to lead the Woodland Park Zoo's efforts to operate through the COVID-19 pandemic.

The steps Michele and her team took and her ongoing work to ensure that the Woodland Park Zoo is ready to welcome visitors back, as soon as given the clearance to open, offer lessons that could benefit every AZA institution.

Know what you have and what you need.

Back in 2017, in her first weeks at WPZ, Michele assessed the Zoo's continuity plan and other existing plans and protocols for all types of situations – a kind of "**health check**" for how the Zoo's operations were performing in general, as well as how well equipped they were to handle an emergency. The health check required active communication and input from all the departments under her purview and identified some gaps in their policies that they could address in a thoughtful and integrated manner.

Through the health check, Michele and her team determined that WPZ had an excellent Emergency Response Plan for on-property emergencies like an animal escape or fire, but knowing how 9/11 affected United Airlines, Michele knew they needed to develop policies and processes to handle the effects of an off-property catastrophe. One of her first priorities was to ensure that WPZ was prepared to shift to **flexible work conditions** if ever necessary by talking to her IT staff about the tools and processes in place and what needed to be enhanced. Work from Home (WFH) capabilities were enacted, enabling working from the Cloud and using Microsoft 365 to provide the appropriate business management tools. Michele's comprehensive health check of the existing plans prepared WPZ with tested and proven WFH capabilities *before* they were essential to their ongoing functioning, as has been the case these last few weeks.

Replicating the work done to develop the WFH capabilities with her IT Team, Michele then focused on coordinated efforts involving the People and Culture, Commissary and Facility teams, reviewing plans for animal care, feeding, sanitation, maintenance and communication to **troubleshoot potential weaknesses** and plug any gaps. They addressed questions involving supply and storage of food, identifying essential workers, prioritizing workflow and developing effective ways to share information with all staff and stakeholders.

Communication is key.

Developing the plans was the necessary first step, but a close second was determining how to share it with all staff so that everyone would be **well informed and prepared to act quickly** and appropriately when needed.

Woodland Park Zoo enacted a multi-tiered plan to be enacted in extraordinary situations based on changing conditions:

- Phase 1: Business as usual
- Phase 1.5: Business as usual but with precautions (crowd control measures)
- Phase 2: Closed but still operating (not open to public but staff still reporting)
- Phase 3: Closed and critical staff only (animal care/veterinary) with others WFH

As COVID-19 hit the Seattle area earlier this year, WPZ was quick to respond and able to do so in a carefully controlled way due to the solid planning already in place and understood by the staff. Senior leadership worked together to establish the protocols and command chain in determining when to flex from one phase to the next, whether on a weekly or even daily basis.

Since the start of COVID-19 and throughout this time, the executive team meets every week and they reach out to all employees on a weekly basis with updates and information. The Vice President of Engagement helped develop the communications plan that lays out a timeline running through October with four different audiences in mind – internal, external, Board and donors.

Pivot for effectiveness.

Since non-essential departments and staff members (those not responsible for animal care, vet or facilities) were able to move from “business as usual” to working from home fairly seamlessly, they were able to **pivot quickly and responsively** to the new situation.

Pivots

Marketing pivoted from traditional to strictly digital: The marketing department enacted digital outreach efforts to keep the community informed and engaged while the Zoo is closed.

Development pivoted from campaign-focused efforts to care calls: Development staff continues to reach out to donors and friends, checking in with them and letting them know that the animals are being well cared for and are doing fine. They are not actively seeking solicitations during these calls but are asking donors to remember them. They have also established a relief fund to support the Zoo during these months of closure.

Education pivoted from on-site, volunteer-driven activities and experiences to the creation of an online syllabus: Education staff worked to prepare and disseminate materials, resources and videos for virtual learning to support Pacific North West schools.

Think ahead.

The comprehensive advanced planning allowed for a **streamlined and purposeful launch of the “new normal,”** freeing up some bandwidth for leadership to prepare for future re-opening. With the knowledge that essential staff were caring for the animals and handling the necessary on-site upkeep while the WFH, non-essential staff were advancing the Zoo’s mission through their targeted departmental efforts, leadership could **identify and address anticipated concerns** that would impact the Zoo’s ability to re-open.

With an eye on being prepared to re-open as soon as allowed, Michele and the leadership team focused on four main issues:

1. Ensuring Financial Stability: Relying on their financial contingency plan, WPZ **is working with their bank to explore an increased line of credit, and is now reviewing the newly created SBA loans created from the recently passed CARES act** to ensure enough liquidity to sustain their operations through these months of closure without tapping into their endowment or Board-designated funds for the time being. They are being thoughtful and targeted in their efforts to cut expenses while maintaining key functionality.
2. Understanding and Meeting City/County/State/CDC Guidelines: WPZ leadership maintains regular contact with local and regional authorities and leverages their Board members’ contacts to access and share information as appropriate. They are working to share their plans with the local health department so that they can be sure they are taking appropriate measures and to learn of any new requirements as soon as possible. They teamed up with their local aquarium partner to bolster their advocacy power in representing their interests and their willingness to serve as a community resource – lots of open space for people to safely walk and appreciate nature and wildlife as a respite from the stresses of the current situation. When the green light is given to re-open, WPZ will have done all in its power to be **well-positioned to welcome back visitors in a safe and timely manner.**
3. Enacting Social Distancing/Crowd Control Measures: Knowing that a re-opening may eventually be authorized first through a limited, phased approach, the leadership team has been taking **proactive steps to enact crowd control measures** that will ensure a safe and enjoyable experience for their visitors. **Timed ticketing** was an item already on their radar, but they have moved up their implementation timeline to be ready for re-opening and are considering other **technological enhancements** that limit hand-to-hand/person-to-person contact. They’ll set aside times just for members and use the

timed ticketing process to ensure manageable crowd size. They also walked the property and marked off areas on their map where **social distancing** could be safely enforced, while designating other areas and buildings off limits due to concerns about crowd control and potential logjams. Finally, plans are being reviewed to develop **signage** to indicate the new crowd flow directions, sanitary facilities and to address new entry and food and retail processes including mobile phone ordering. They also plan to mimic standards recently enacted at grocery stores where necessary and possible, such as lines on floors to indicate safe distances, plastic barriers between people, food/registers, use of gloves, etc.

4. Preparing for Flexible Staffing: Building on their flexible staffing plans that address fluctuating seasonality needs, WPZ will rely on these standards to inform their decision making as they develop a **hybrid staffing response** upon re-opening. There will be active and ongoing communication with their staff to share plans and expectations in as timely a manner as possible in recognition of the toll that uncertainty takes on their highly valued employees.

Through these efforts, Michele and her team at Woodland Park Zoo have stayed in front of the situation with their **thoughtful leadership, proactive strategic planning** and **creative responses** to a challenging situation. Woodland Park Zoo's example may serve as a template for the AZA to consider for creating an emergency planning protocol as part of the accreditation process, including development of a business continuity checklist and guidelines with standards and best practices to guide AZA members during times like these. By sharing what works and promoting proactive planning, AZA members can support each other and ensure that we all emerge to welcome our visitors back, serve our communities and promote critical conservation messaging that is as important as ever.



Rick Biddle and Michele Smith