

Leadership and Team Development Solution Improves Hurricane Preparedness

A Case Study of AIM Investment Services



Data and account processing are core functions at any financial services company. In addition to their job of insuring that their work goes smoothly, data processing managers prepare for things to go wrong—very wrong.

Even before a season in which four major hurricanes hit the US mainland, Houston-based AIM Investment Services was fine-tuning its preparedness. A big storm hitting the Houston-Galveston area is only one of the threats they must bear in mind. A month before Hurricane Charley, the first of the four, a high-level team-building exercise in AIM's Denver satellite office had helped create a foundation for a day when headquarters might be completely shut down.

A subsidiary of London-based financial giant AMVESCAP, AIM processes investment transactions and account information for millions of individuals and institutions. When AIM merged with INVESCO, a large mutual fund manager based in Denver, it decided to integrate the two companies' back offices in a number of important ways, including making Denver a backup satellite, ready to take over crucial functions should Houston ever be unable to operate.

In the event the main processing center in Houston lost the ability to function or to communicate, Denver would stand in and take over some mission-critical functions. Possessing a fraction of the personnel and equipment employed in Houston, Denver would have to work hard and smart with little margin for error. Rhonda Dixon-Gunner, Senior Vice President and Denver Site Manager, was thinking ahead—and not just about hurricanes.

Her concern was that a management structure that facilitated routine processing might not work perfectly when and if Denver had to switch into disaster-recovery mode. Of 14 managers at her Denver site, only one reported directly to her; everyone else reported to someone in Houston. Dixon-Gunner observed that, "when we merged, our shop was converted from a stand-alone processing center to a remote part of a much larger center. It was natural that camaraderie and identification with the Denver team suffered. Since there was significant turnover of personnel and since the new people were reporting directly to Houston, we lost cross-management energy and community."

"If we had to take over because of a disaster in Houston and if communications to Houston were lost," said Dixon-Gunner, "our people in Denver would need to interact with each other quickly and efficiently. I asked Dennis Mease to help us out."

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— Rhonda Dixon-Gunner, Senior Vice President and Denver Site Manager

Mease is an internal consultant in AIM's Houston headquarters who specializes in organization development. "The situation Rhonda described was perfect for an intensive workshop. I drew on techniques we were already using in leadership development, change management, and team building to create a customized program for the Denver AIM Investment Services managers."

Dixon-Gunner and Mease agreed that the purpose was more ambitious than to create a smoother-functioning disaster recovery operation. They would seek to recreate some of the sense of community that had been lost during and after the merger.

Mease created a workshop program to be conducted on two consecutive half days. To help build both self-awareness and group awareness, he started off with a heavy dose of personality and psychological assessments. The

CPI 260®, FIRO-B®, and MBTI® Step II instruments were all administered to the participants in advance and online. Mease was then well prepared, with the results analyzed and assembled in advance and with personalized reports for each participant printed out.

“The first session,” recalled Dixon-Gunner, “established goals and purposes and then jumped right into the results of the assessments. The managers got to take a look at themselves and, more important, got a much better understanding of where the others were coming from. With the foundation provided by the first day, we were able to complete an ambitious agenda during the second day: team building, defining strengths, and establishing action items. Our people are very pleased with the results, and Houston has gotten excited about our process.”

“The participants loved the assessments,” reported Mease. “The CPI 260 instrument and reports are particularly applicable to our management. We used the Coaching Report for Leaders, which compared our responses with those of a benchmark database of thousands of successful leaders. And, it’s written in a language that resonates. The folks in Denver were really knocked out by that assessment and report.”

An experienced trainer, Mease now specializes in leadership development and in large-scale change management projects. He works with teams, as he did in Denver, performs one-on-one executive coaching, and is developing a Sales Organization project that will touch 500 people at AIM.

“Assessments are fantastic tools,” said Mease. “In addition to the three we used in Denver, I frequently employ the *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (TKI) in team-building situations and the *Strong Interest Inventory*® assessment in our career management program.”

“We use other assessments as well, but the five mentioned have an added advantage: all can be administered online through the SkillsOne® Web site,” continued Mease. SkillsOne.com, created by CPP, Inc., of Mountain View, California, enables participants to complete assessments anywhere, anytime.

Mease recounted his own experience: “I’d been using assessments for years when the SkillsOne site was introduced. The difference was incredible. Online administration is so much easier than using hard-copy questionnaires and mail-in answer sheets. And the management and reporting capabilities let me do much more, more easily. For example, in the Denver program we added another participant just four days prior to the first day. It was easy for him to complete all three assessments and for me to integrate his results into my group report. I could not have done any of that before SkillsOne.com.”

Hurricane or no (and Charley was only the first to hit the US in a bad year), more and more people at AIM appreciate the value assessments can add to a broad range of training and organization development activities.

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