

Moscow *Live*: A Videoconference with Russian Business Students

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On April 3, 2009, the Lauder Russian Track participated in a videoconference with Russian business students enrolled at the Academy of the National Economy in Moscow. The event was very successful, promoting both language refinement and cultural exchange.

As we walked in, the classroom looked fairly normal, with the exception of the portal through time and space that had opened in one of the usually bare, white walls. The presence of this anomaly provoked some initial disorientation, though the vertigo quickly gave way to a burgeoning sense of empowerment. Through the miracle of teleconferencing technology, a wall had become a window on Russia, and more precisely, a window on a classroom at Moscow's Academy of the National Economy, thousands of miles away. No blurry images, no jerky, robotic gestures, no choppy, inelegant speech marred the experience. Indeed, nothing could have been more natural: Russian business students on one side of the room regarding their American counterparts seated opposite.

We, the participants in this virtual conference, had agreed to tackle the great issue of our day—the *crisis*. Before launching into our discussion about the global financial downturn's effects on the United States and Russia, the Lauder Russian Track students assumed the role of ambassadors, and, adopting Russian as the lingua franca, described the Wharton curriculum and the school's academic and social atmosphere. Our Russian colleagues, who worked full-time in addition to pursuing their business degrees, listened to our overview of Wharton with great interest.

Having introduced ourselves, we slipped easily into another role, that of economic analysts. Taking turns, the members of the American team spotlighted the crisis' most serious effects in the United States, such as increasing unemployment, the bankruptcy of many large and small businesses and banks, and the crisis' influence on the 2008 presidential campaign. For their part, the Russian students depicted the havoc wreaked by the recession in their home country, emphasizing the tightening of the job market and noting—with a mixture of relief and lingering unease—that they remained gainfully employed. Commentary flowed smoothly between Moscow and Philadelphia, unencumbered by technological or linguistic difficulties, allowing for insightful, intellectual exchange across unfathomable physical distance.

The international conversation now turned from the macroeconomic consequences of the crisis to the precise problems affecting a single firm—Samaya Kompaniya, or The Company. Both teams, in anticipation of the conference, had prepared the quasi-hypothetical case of Samaya Kompaniya, the facts of which paralleled those of an actual consulting firm, for which one of our Russian interlocutors had worked. The case presented us with a dire problem. In short, after spending most of its capital in a race for a lucrative consulting contract, Samaya Kompaniya would soon run out of money, its hard-fought new contract having disintegrated in the wake of the financial crisis. As the Russian and American teams took turns laying out their respective proposals for how to save Samaya Kompaniya, a curious and rather unexpected divide began to reveal itself. While the American group advocated vigorously for a complete restructuring of Samaya Kompaniya, our Russian colleagues insisted that simply injecting more money into the troubled firm would cure its infirmities. Each team delivered impassioned speeches in support of its proffered remedy. In the end, however, the arguments seemed to run past each other, and no amount of oratory could lead the two camps to common ground.

Could one attribute the divergent managerial strategies to differences in the studied conclusions of Russian and American scholars of business administration? Or was the dissimilarity of the proposals ascribable to culture? The historical trajectories of American and Russian capitalism differ widely. Consequently, one would expect managerial approaches and priorities to vary, reflecting national experience. Nevertheless, a deeper question arises. How much of the managerial decision-making process does conscious rationalism govern, and how much of it does intuition—gut feeling based on cultural preferences—determine? These questions remain open. Their answers depend on a profound understanding of Russian and American culture, history and economic development, insight, which we hope to gain through our studies and research at the Lauder Institute.

All too soon, the videoconference with the Russian business students came to an end. Yet, even during the short two hour discussion, bonds had formed between the Russian and American participants that went beyond our joint effort to solve Samaya Kompaniya's financial ills. Indeed, we bid each other farewell to the sound of hearty applause as each of us, Americans and Russians, received a signed certificate marking the occasion. For many of us this international conversation—this gaze into the portal—represented just the first determined step toward a greater comprehension of Russian business. Nevertheless, the videoconference did teach us a vital lesson: not all business minds think alike.*

* Slogan from the Lauder Institute brochure.