

BUSINESS

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Synchronicity

Small-business coach, facilitator offers program tailor-made for lean times

By Jonathan Devin

Small-business owners often get started in the world of entrepreneurship with a strong desire for independence, but Michael Synk says that groups of minds produce better strategies than those that go it alone.

“People in business are taught that you’re supposed to keep it all behind closed doors, you never let them see you sweat, but that doesn’t reflect running a business,” said Synk, owner of In-Synk, his coaching/consulting firm for top-level business executives.

This spring, Synk marked his 10th year in executive education aimed mostly at helping small businesses form and implement strategic long-term plans, something he said happens best with the help of a rare commodity in business realms: a listening ear.

Business owners, Synk explained, have few or no peers in-house, so he created various forums for business owners of noncompeting industries to support each other.

Synk’s Inner Circle, a national franchise, is a forum of small groups of about eight to 10 members. Once a month, they meet for breakfast and, for about 3½ hours, they talk about issues that are impeding their progress while getting advice from other members.

It is, as Synk likes to say, an opportunity to “open the kimono.”

“Inner Circle is where you can come and speak freely and get talk time with other business owners who don’t compete with you, but in a confidential setting with a facilitator who makes everyone play by the rules,” Synk said. “Whatever it is that you’re losing sleep over, you come to this meeting and you get questioned by everybody, people throw out theories, and you get this group of trusted advisers who don’t have a vested interest.”

Members come for free the first time, then can sign up for a quarter, then renew their membership as they like. Ideal candidates are owners of



In-Synk owner Michael Synk talks with clients recently during a monthly In-Synk Huddle at the Crescent Club.

businesses with sales between \$1 million and \$50 million, he said.

Jack Dewald, president of Agency Services Inc., a wholesale insurance distribution company, has been a member of the Inner Circle for seven years.

“I let the group serve as an accountability feature for me for the plans and commitments I make in business,” Dewald said. “It can be lonesome as the sole owner of a business because you don’t have any peers. You have employees, but they’re not exact peers dealing with the same issues.”

Dewald also participates in the group’s annual Vision Quest, in which circle members present their three-year strategic plans to the group and receive critiques. Recently, he also hired Synk to listen to him give a speech for feedback on his public-speaking style.

Synk got started in the field by giving speeches, offering business retreats and working one-on-one with CEOs.

About a year ago, with the economy forcing small businesses to make cutbacks, Synk came up with a smaller package for owners called the In-Synk Huddle. These groups also meet once a month, but only for an hour, and cover principles of business guru Verne Harnish’s Gazelles Growth Model. Members pay \$49 per meeting.

That appealed to Michael Drake, CEO of masterIT, who began hiring Synk about five years ago to work with his management team in strategic planning.

“Michael’s best talent is that he’s a real person,” Drake said. “He has practical experience, so he understands the challenges (business owners) experience. He’s very transparent and very organized in his delivery. These Huddle meetings are always an hour and he’s able to deliver a whole lot of information in a short amount of time.”

Synk, previously a high school history teacher from Detroit, spent a couple of decades working in management training capacities at Kelly Services and other companies before deciding to go to work for himself.

He is the author of one book, “How to Create Customers as Loyal as Norm Peterson,” referring to a character from the TV series “Cheers.”

Synk’s future projects include expanding into the area of sales-force effectiveness and forming a business book-of-the-month group, in which participants gather to listen to podcasts of new business literature and have a discussion.

Synk said the biggest challenge he sees small businesses facing is a failure to align resources and ideas for success.

“Alignment is getting all your ducks in a row so that your actions add up to something,” Synk said. “There are a lot of good ideas in business that don’t line up to produce something better or provide new growth.”

In-Synk

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