

Business therapy for NE Wisconsin

Looking for battered entrepreneurs to rehab back into peak performance

by Sean Fitzgerald, New North B2B publisher



Businesses can function like a fine-tuned athlete, exercising healthy operations and achieving “perfect 10” financial performances. But it’s not unusual for any business owner to become out of shape or suffer from an unexpected trauma to the business.

In such instances, a bit of rehabilitation done properly can help to get business operations back on track.

That’s been goal of B2B’s so-called Firefighters of Northeast Wisconsin program, an initiative spawned five years ago to help struggling entrepreneurs access the management and financial training they need to get back in the game.

New North B2B magazine plans to kick off the sixth year of its popular Firefighters series before the end of 2016, pairing up a ready-to-improve business owner in need of guidance with a leading consultant from the region providing his expertise at no cost. Longtime B2B readers will recall the program emanated from the idea of providing assistance to those business owners who were constantly putting out fires, reacting to unexpected problems, and never really moving forward on the task of growing their business.

If you’re a business owner struggling to get ahead but having difficult gaining traction – or if you know of a business owner who could use a helpful nudge to improve the outlook for their company – please consider submitting a nomination for our upcoming Firefighters program during the month of November. Here’s a bit more on the initiative.

An evolving approach to business rehab

Since 2011, a handful of some of northeast Wisconsin’s leading small business consultants have volunteered their time and expertise to work with these business owners over the course of four to five months to put out the fires in their business, refine their operational practices, and get to the task of working on the business rather than in the business.

During that time, we’ve helped nine business owners from all stages of development build a more effective strategy for growth. Some were startups just launching into the market. Some were evolving into second-stage companies and needed direction to build the management, technology and financial framework to a larger scale than they previously needed. And some of the entrepreneurs were simply putting out fires in the business all day long, struggling to get over the hump.

Guidance from the consultant appointed to each business owner carried with it the responsibility of the business owner to meet at least monthly, put every bit of effort into practicing the training they received, and be open and honest in sharing their experience with B2B readers.

Like a reality television series, B2B provided a monthly update reporting on the progress of the work between the consultant and business owner, as well as highlighting the changes made to the business operations. In doing so, it’s the goal of the program to help readers who might be facing similar challenges leading their own company.

A look back

The program’s most recent alumnus – Kelly Steinke, owner of Appleton-based READ Learning Services – participated in the Firefighter series late in 2015 and into this year as she launched her avocation into a fulltime business. Steinke was paired with Gary Vaughan of Guident Business Solutions in Appleton - our most veteran consultant from the program - to aid her startup reading training consultancy.

Now a year old, READ Learning Services has developed a reading teaching product that’s being marketed with some large, national educational product distributors. Steinke has been busy speaking to groups about teaching dyslexic students to read, and has built a network of reading teachers seeking her products and advice.

“Within that year, it’s amazing to look back and see what’s been accomplished,” the former special needs teacher said shortly after her anniversary of leaving the classroom to go into business for herself fulltime. Steinke said her work with Vaughan helped her “set the business up the right way,” and explained that managing the books and gauging the financial performance of her business has become routine.

“I don’t think I’d be in the position that I’m in right now if I didn’t have the opportunity to work with Gary,” Steinke said. “Working with Gary helped give me a lot of accountability and structure.”

Vaughan is returning to work with another organization for our upcoming edition of the Firefighters program, which we plan to begin in December. If you have an interest in participating, or know an entrepreneur who could benefit from the assistance of this business therapy initiative, send an email to sean@newnorthb2b.com with a couple of paragraphs explaining why such assistance would be beneficial. Perhaps we can bring your business back to optimal performance and help you put out the fires that plague your company from exceptional growth. ■