



One-Time Volunteer Boards

By Bruce Miles

We've all been there. We have this great idea that we think could really grow our business. We turn it over in our minds for weeks, months, maybe even years. It seems like such a good idea, but will it really work? How would we get started? Has someone else tried something similar & could we learn from them?

At a recent meeting, I listened as a business owner shared his desire to bring his technology business to the national level. He wanted to hire someone who understood his technology and had national sales experience. It was the chicken-or-egg dilemma. What's more important: Sales experience? Technology expertise? What blend of both would deliver the most success? More importantly, how would an entrepreneurial tech guy supervise his first sales person?

We have asked some strong area sales managers and professionals who sell technology to serve as a "One-Time Volunteer Board" to help the business owner start thinking about how to build a system that promotes national growth, and how to oversee that system. The business owner buys lunch, and he gets to harvest more than 100+ years of sales management & technology expertise.

A new concept? Hardly. CEOs of the nation's largest companies turn to their executive team or board of directors to help them drive their organizations forward. One-Time Volunteer Boards serve a similar purpose for smaller business owners looking to learn from some distinguished intellect.

This concept of volunteer boards is a continuation of my last column on moving ideas forward by mastering the art of delegation. Perhaps you want to introduce your business to a new market, introduce a new product or learn how to transition from "being the operation" to managing the company. Volunteer boards provide the next step by allowing CEOs to turn a great idea into actionable items.



Tap experience

The concept is simple, but effective. Bring together six or seven business leaders who can help answer a question, provide meeting space and lunch, and provide a stimulating case study regarding your business and your idea.

Volunteer boards allow business owners to tap into the experience and skills of leaders, test out potential ideas and gain valuable feedback to capitalize on opportunities, grow the organization, and hopefully avoid mistakes.

Volunteer board members who are willing to add value to your organization won't be hard to find. Ask individuals who already donate their time in other places - serving with you on boards or community projects. Local business organizations, like our Chamber of Commerce, also can help you locate those professionals.

Then, ask. Tell them where you need their help and what you think they bring to the topic. You will find that most leaders are eager to help and find the experience rewarding because the reflection and conversation helps them think through some of their own issues, too.

Stay focused

Getting the right people in the room is key, but the most effective meetings require specifically identifying what you want to know. Narrowing the topic to one or two questions will allow your board members to provide more specific insights and make the meeting more productive.

Tara Tollefson, CEO of The Buzz Company in St. Joseph, convened a volunteer board a year ago, looking for guidance. She felt stuck and did not know where to focus her energy among the too-many items competing for her time.

She spent the first five minutes of the meeting setting the stage, telling the group about her business and the question at hand. Then she sat back and quietly took in the discussion and direction set by the board members.



She learned that she needed to stick to her core business, better articulate her mission, and re-brand the business.

"It's powerful and important to look at your business from different angles, and it's almost impossible to do that on your own," Tollefson said. "Volunteer boards allow you to tap into a group of experts who can give you different perspectives"

Competing and growing in today's business world requires agility and the ability to make the right move at the right time. Don't try to do it alone. Tap into a network of leaders who have been there, and can help you design a path for quicker success.

This is the opinion of Bruce H. Miles, chief executive of Big River Consulting Group, specializing in strategic planning, organizational growth and better hiring and firing practices.