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Business coaches focus on big picture

By **Ryan Doran**



The Alternative Board of Southwestern Connecticut based in Wilton wants to stack the deck for success via real world-tested business leaders.

For five years Vernon “Buck” Miller, president at The Alternative Board of Southwestern Connecticut, has been the Fairfield County coach of The Alternative Board. The Alternative Board, headquartered in Colorado, is a franchise advisory program with more than 250 coaches across the U.S., Canada and the U.K.

“I started in 2005,” said Miller. “We focus on where you want your business to be in three to five years and how you’re going to get there. So often someone who is running a business is so wrapped up in the nitty-gritty that they have no clue where it’s all leading.”

Miller is a veteran of private law practice, in-house legal counseling and private-company management. He served as director and senior manager of a major U.S.-based shipping company with additional responsibilities for international and domestic joint ventures, insurance, crisis management, financing and project management.

“The biggest single challenge to businesses seems to be organization,” said Miller. “Entrepreneurs are great at going with an idea at sheer force of will and carrying an entire organization in the right direction.”

Miller limits boards to eight to 10 business owners, who get together once each month for four-hour intensive meetings. Members range from owners of \$60 million companies to the smallest of the small employers.

“You don’t need to put a year’s amount of money on the table at a time,” said Miller. “We want the members to get value from every interaction. Everyone has a slice of time to talk about challenges of the business. They can also talk about a personal matter; that can weigh into the business. The main thing is that you tap into each other. What’s amazing is the extent to which running a retail operation carries over to somebody running a manufacturing plant.”

Miller said The Alternative Board membership is renewed on a monthly basis.

“Often things that are hugely important to these businesses can be discussed and they find solutions,” said Miller.

Miller said each member of the boards receives one-on-one coaching separately from the monthly meetings.

“You need to have an action point,” said Miller. “You need to keep them moving in the right direction.”

Miller said another task of being an Alternative Board coach is finding the right mix of business owners.

“It’s about developing plans of action and finding a group that can do that,” said Miller. “It’s absolutely fascinating to see how these business owners love to help one another. I generally have 100 percent attendance because nobody wants to miss it; they are very interested in each others’ businesses.”

Miller said that many times issues that cannot be raised at the workplace can be raised in front of objective strangers.

“We do hold peoples feet to the fire,” said Miller. “If they don’t take the advice that’s fine, but they need to take action. Nobody is there to waste each other’s time.”

From 2007 to 2008, Miller helped his members deal with questions saving costs and building the efficiency; readying them to weather the coming storm.

In 2009, Miller spoke to many board members about cutting staff and reducing salaries: some of the hardest challenges that businesses owner’s deal with.

Miller said the theme of the last few months at Alternative Board meetings has been to be creative in your industry and differentiate.

“Small businesses must stop functioning as an island,” said Jason Zickerman, president and CEO of The Alternative Board. “To achieve true success, you need small business support, entrepreneurial advice and the best business ideas. Companies with access to entrepreneurial advice from those who have succeeded, coupled with personalized small business support, eventually grow, evolve and prosper.”