

No business is an island

BY JOAN LOWNDS

The Alternative Board (TAB) of Southwestern Connecticut wants to teach privately held businesses how to hit the curveball, and hit it out of the park. Wiltonian Vernon "Buck" Miller, coach of the Fairfield County chapter of TAB, and president of the Alternative Board of Southwestern Connecticut, said the goal is to help business owners "take action to solve the challenges they are facing and stop functioning as islands."

Toward this end, Mr. Miller said he has established an advisory board of "eight to 10 business owners. We meet monthly in a four-hour board meeting at which each member gets a slice of time to seek solutions to his/her business challenges from the other board members. I then provide individual coaching to my board members to help them develop and implement action plans to solve their challenges."

Mr. Miller, a lawyer and former director and senior manager of The Skaarup Group, a Greenwich-based international bulk ocean shipping transportation business, said TAB tries to help businesses "think more strategically — to think about where they want to be in another three to five years, and how to get there. Sometimes they are working so hard in the business that they lose track of the big picture."

TAB, which is a franchise advisory board headquartered in Colorado, has more than 275 coaches in the U.S., Canada, the U.K. and Venezuela. "We're a think tank and a support group for privately held businesses," Mr. Miller said. "Our members range from small to mid-size and businesses making over \$100 million in sales."

His TAB peer advisory group includes "CPAs, retail businesses, importers, exporters, software developers, owners of construction companies and service



Wiltonian Vernon "Buck" Miller is coach of the Fairfield County chapter of The Alternative Board (TAB), which acts as a think tank and support group for privately held businesses.

—Joan Lownds photo

companies of all sorts," said Mr. Miller.

However, Mr. Miller said there is much common ground at the monthly four-hour board meetings. "Seventy-five percent of business issues are the same," he said. "My board members get to tap each other's wealth and years of expertise, and a different perspective." As a result, sometimes a solution to a challenge will "come out of left field and land like a grenade on the table," Mr. Miller said.

Board meetings are "vigorous, but non-competitive and confidential," he said.

The challenges range from weathering the economic storm to organizational issues, strategic planning and "getting and keeping good employees," said Mr.

Miller, who has worked for TAB since 2005, and has lived in Wilton since 1982.

Mr. Miller said attendance at meetings is usually around 100%. "The business owners love to help each other," he said. The geographic range extends from Greenwich to Bridgeport, he said.

Once a plan of action is developed for a specific challenge, the board member is held accountable. "We do hold people's feet to the fire," he said.

According to board member Michael Rosa, owner of MMR Construction in Stamford, "The people on the board are bright and articulate. They won't tell you what you want to hear, but what you need to hear."

Mr. Rosa said TAB has helped boost his business. "They give a unique perspective to any challenge presented," he said. "The fresh outlook and ability to bounce ideas off an independent board has enabled me to maintain a steady growth."

Board member Frank Orzechowski, owner of Cartridge World of Fairfield County, commended his colleagues on the board. "The ideas and solutions they bring to the table are practical, insightful and useful. Buck, together with the TAB program, is keeping me on track and pointed in the right direction."

TAB membership is month to month, so the business owner has complete control over his membership, Mr. Miller said. A graduate of Cornell Law School, Mr. Miller also has a master's of business administration from New York University. He said he came to TAB through a "roundabout route. But I have run a business from start-up to successful maturity and I think I bring good value to my members."

Information: TAB-SWCT.com.