

## **Program offers businesses practical advice**

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Is your business ready for some fine-tuning, expert advice and hands-on tools to move it to the next level? The Advanced Business Management Program may be just the ticket.

The program includes customized lectures, workshops and discussions on practical ways to increase revenues and overcome business challenges. Participants also can request on-site visits for more in-depth help. The program starts on September 17 and runs for about a year, with participants meeting for a three-hour session for each of 10 months.

Washington State University Business LINKS is offering the program for the second year, supported by a \$7,500 grant from CH2M Hill Hanford Group.

According to Debbie Bone-Harris, program coordinator, the program's four goals are to increase profitability, enhance management performance, solve basic business problems and learn from other practicing entrepreneurs.

"We bring in speakers who are experts in specific business support areas, such as bankers, lawyers, CPAs and marketing and human resources professionals, as well as people with knowledge of e-commerce, security, international trade and leadership," Bone-Harris said.

"It's not just theory," she added. "People can take what they have learned from each session and apply it to their own businesses starting the very next day." For example, she said, one business owner applied for and received a line of credit after hearing tips from bankers who spoke in the program.

Tara Erben attended last year's course and found it valuable. Erben started her specialty gift shop, River House, in 1997. A marketing expert in the program complimented Erben on the brand image conveyed by the Richland shop's bags, but suggested including the company's logo and website on the decorative paper that wraps products.

Another speaker, an accountant, explained how to evaluate businesses objectively, Erben recalled. "For me, that means doing things like replacing products that aren't selling enough to justify the square footage in which they are displayed," she said. Erben remembered the accountant telling the business owners that if they were not making money, they should quit. "That has really stuck with me," she said. "You need to be ruthless about constantly finding ways to improve your profitability."

Diane Draper, who co-owns Northwest Technical Glass with her husband Jay, also appreciated the accountant's counsel when she attended the course last

year. "He went through our firm's financial statements and clarified what we needed to pay attention to for growth," she said. The Drapers' Richland company began in 1997, providing custom glass-blowing for customers such as laboratories, food processing plants and universities.

Legal and personnel issues are popular topics, Bone-Harris said. An attorney speaking for the program counseled Erben to retain her legal status as a sole proprietorship rather than switching to a limited liability corporation. And a human resources expert convinced Erben that she needed to create an employee handbook "so we all understand what's expected," she said.

To encourage practical help and candid sharing, participants sign an agreement to keep discussions about other firms confidential. And Bone-Harris makes sure no competing businesses are enrolled in the program at the same time.

Draper was among those who appreciated the collegial discussions. "I got a lot of good advice from the other business owners about how to upgrade a benefits package," she said. She and her husband are preparing to hire more employees after winning a Navy contract recently.

Erben liked the practicality and no-nonsense attitude fostered by the speakers. "I don't have time to waste, and they understood that. They were very honest and direct in critiquing our businesses," she said.

Bone-Harris modeled the program after the Purdue University Entrepreneurship Program. The director of that program is scheduled to speak to the Tri-Cities group about entrepreneurship at the November session.

The registration deadline is August 31. Attendance is limited to 15 people. Interested small businesses must have no more than 100 employees, operate full time and have a one-year record of sales.

A \$750 fee covers the business owner and one other employee for the ten seminars, materials and on-site individual consulting. Columbia Trust Bank and the City of Richland are offering a limited number of \$500 scholarships, enabling a few firms to participate for \$250.

The sessions are held at Business LINKS in Richland and at some participants' firms.

To register, or for more information, contact Debbie Bone-Harris at [dbharris@tricity.wsu.edu](mailto:dbharris@tricity.wsu.edu) or (509) 372-7613.