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## **Business Boot Camp**

By DAVID WOODBURN, Tucson Citizen

Such sessions are a trendy form of basic training for small-business owners and managers. There are no uniforms, bellowing drill sergeants, pushups in puddles, obstacle courses.

Move over, military.

This is business boot camp.

It started with the team-building trend, in which office members participate in an outdoor retreat, working together to complete a ropes course, for example.

More and more, the trend has switched to workshop- or seminar-style boot camps, basic training for small-business owners and managers.

"I think that's where the 'boot camp' idea comes from," said Susan Ratliff of Exhibit Experts, the developer of the Women's Small Business Boot Camp in Phoenix. "I tend to play that idea to the hilt in marketing my event, but really the seminars I've gone to over the years tried to focus on the basics of running a business, like basic training."

The boot camp idea has evolved from the team-building retreats meant to build morale and cooperation.

It's intense, said Clint Parry of Action International in Tucson, which provides the "Business Academy 101" seminar.

"It covers a lot of stuff in a very short time frame, which relates these types of things to the military and a 'boot camp' concept," he said. "It's looked at as a training ground."

"These are usually four-day retreats to create self-awareness, clarify values and gets people out of their comfort zone," said Orlando Blake of the Blake Group, a business consulting firm in Elgin. "There are usually two schools of thought on these - one is developmental, getting people working together and learning to be more flexible; the other is remedial, looking to improve dysfunction and learn how to work together better," he said.

Blake said, though, that those types of boot camps have fallen out of favor because of a lack of long-term success. "There was a study done about the effectiveness of these things, and it was found that these types of retreats only seem to be good for about six months," he said, citing an March 2000 article in Review of Business. "That is a large investment for six months, and businesses will seem to go back to old habits. And if a businesses has to go back to these things every six months, that's an indication of something fundamentally wrong."

Parry agreed:

"One downside to these is that once the business owner leaves, he or she may have a tendency to slip back into their old ways, so it's critical that they create some form of accountability, such as a coach to help them implement what they've learned."

Blake said studies show that training along with regular coaching afterward - and officer, if you will, to keep the troops in order - can be three times more effective in improving a business than a boot camp alone.

Blake's alternative features a seminar over two or three days, but it is followed by regular coaching and follow-up by Blake.

"We do regular assessments and I work with businesses for a year and we make contact about a couple times a month and have a six-month retreat so we reinforce the training," he said.

Melanie Seacat, operations administrator for the Pima County Department of Development Services, went through Blake's program. "The program has been very impactful," she said. "It really shined a spotlight on our organization and showed us where we are and what we need to do to improve. It was a fantastic experience in that it gave me concrete tools to use so that our mission and our goals are aligned while working within a team-based environment."

Caryn Langdon of Phoenix-area-based Coffee News, went through Action International's "101" seminar, which Parry and other AI coaches offered in Phoenix, and had coaching along the way.

"There is little doubt to me that the coaching aspect really helps reinforce things so you can move forward," she said. "I have been working with a couple of different coaches, with one of them suggesting I go through the Business Academy through Action International, and having the coaching along with it has been fabulous."

Ratliff's women's business boot camp came about from a lack of success in seminars she'd attended. "I had attended a lot of these types of seminars over the years, and I found that many of them had a lot of fluff, theory and philosophy," she said. "I came out of these still lacking some real tools or concepts that I could take right back to the office and implement. This

women's business boot camp really addresses the meat and potatoes of running a business and really provides those tools and concepts that are very practical and can be implemented immediately."

Ratliff said her idea is targeted toward woman-owned businesses that have 10 or fewer employees, known as microbusinesses. The event is held each January in Phoenix, and she intends to eventually take the concept to the national level.

Dianne Trinque of Restor-to-Nu, a commercial furniture restoration business in Tucson, has attended two of Ratliff's boot camps. "We had just bought the business, and not having owned a business before, we thought it would be a good experience," Trinque said. "The information was just invaluable. I definitely came back energized."

Trinque said she liked Ratliff's camp because it is held on a Saturday, which made it less stressful than taking time away from work to go. And she said the presenters shared stories overcoming hardships that were inspiring for a new business owner.

But the intense boot camp format has its drawbacks. "It's exhausting, there's no doubt," Trinque said. "But it worked OK because they had an ongoing theme that carried through. It's a good kind of exhaustion."

Trinque also said it can be hard to get to know other participants.

"You run into someone and you really want to talk to them, but you can't," she said. If you meet someone you might think is a contact for your business, you exchange business cards, and hope to contact them later, she said.

Action International's "101," Parry said, can be another boot camp concept.

"This academy provides a functional overview, covering the fundamentals of a business," Parry said. "It addresses three major challenges in business - time, employee retention and motivation, and money."

He said this idea is for those who need a basic foundation about business operations and are "a little leery or don't want to invest in coaching because it can be very expensive." Parry is planning a boot camp for the fall in Tucson, and is working on a way to get around people balking at the cost.

"As a general rule, Phoenix is more progressive," Parry said. "It's tough to find someone willing to pay \$1,000-\$1,500 for a two-day camp."

For Trinique, traveling to Phoenix was not a problem. "In some ways, it's kind of nice to think of Tucson and Phoenix as a region," she said. "I'd hate to have an overkill of the same thing in too many places."

Parry said he is looking at two-for-one deals or other ways to help make it more affordable. "I'm toying with some different ways of positioning it," he said.

Langdon, from Coffee News, praised the Business Academy. "I have been through several of these seminars, and I thought this one was excellent because of the way it was set up," she said. "My business partner and I were just getting started and this was a great education to get started. I thought it was very complete. Some of the coaching we've had has covered a specific area of business - sales, marketing, etc. But Action covered all areas of business. This has helped us be more aware and more prepared for what's ahead and to make good decisions."

Boot camps in general "can be very effective if hands-on exercises are incorporated," Parry said. "While a business owner cannot possibly learn

everything there is to know about business in two days, they can get great exposure to principles they've never thought of or perhaps just needed a refresher course. "The key is to give them enough to be dangerous, but not so much that they hit overwhelm and paralysis."

Orlando E. Blake, CPT, PhD of The Blake Group in Elgin provides a four-day retreat and workshop with regular coaching after the workshop to reinforce principles discussed. His program can be customized to meet individual business needs.

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