



## **IN DEPTH: EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

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### **Professional development can take workforce to next level**

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No matter what the size of your business, professional development training is a necessary component in developing a powerful workforce.

Investing in outside business consulting and training can reap results that existing management can't always offer their own companies -- no matter how smoothly they believe their ships are sailing.

Six years ago, the Westlake dental practice of Masterpiece Smiles, owned by Dr. Mitch Moore, moved into a new office.

Moore knew he wanted to be the leading provider of cosmetic dentistry in Austin, but he did not know how to get there.

He met Suzanne Black, owner and president of Austin-based BushBlack Consulting Group, when he decided to sign up for a Dental Boot Kamp program that was co-led by Black.

"[It] turned my world upside down," Moore says. "I was a science and math major and had never thought about how interpersonal skills affected my business. Suzanne helped me define my vision."

Moore says Black also taught him, over a short six-month period, to see his business goals in a new light.

"It's not all about bottom-line numbers. For me, it is about accomplishing my business vision and being happy," he says.

"Often, the barrier to new learning is old learning and being afraid to get help because you don't know how to do that or are afraid you can't afford it."

BushBlack Consulting Group focuses on privately held companies in service-sector businesses such as health care, law and accounting.

Working with her team of nine coaches and administrative support, Black helps decision makers and their employees market themselves effectively, deliver customer service, develop energetic teams and keep their company visions alive. Her consulting group has worked with companies throughout the United States and Canada.

Black says that improving a company's culture can take anywhere from 18 months to two and half years, though most take two to three years.

"Clients report increases of 15 percent to 20 percent, on the low end, to 100 percent increases, on the high end,

in both productivity and profitability," she says.

Perhaps outside professional development training is so successful because it provides a more neutral forum in which organizations can solve issues, develop strategies and implement goals, says Dr. Larry Abeln, associate dean of the University of Texas McCombs School of Business.

Abeln asserts that a neutral setting provides a risk-free space for management and employees to explore and converse about issues.

Abeln also is the director of UT's \$12 million Executive Education program, which links professional development resources with client companies.

"Often our client companies will send employees through business school without a traceable result to company goals," he says.

"Companies may find that needed answers are found directly from employees in their organizations sharing best practices and engaging in beneficial conversations."

Black says that cost often prohibits business owners from investing in professional development or enlisting the aid of consultants, but BushBlack doesn't require clients to buy the whole enchilada.

"Costs are entirely self-directed by the client who can purchase services as needed and as they experience the return on investment," she says.

Choosing the right consultant or training program means understanding the company's needs in the first place.

Often, organizational problems are symptomatic of deeper concerns that will not surface until an outside consultant is brought in to evaluate the situation.

Marlene Clark, vice president of Austin-based Momentum Consulting, says that companies -- like people -- have blind spots, and outside consultants can help businesses see the entire picture.

"We identify those [blind spots] and customize our work to address those needs," she says.

Momentum President Craig Clark stresses the importance of the introductory conversations that take place between companies and potential consultants.

He says these discussions should clarify the issues that need to be addressed and solidify the company's commitment to make changes or expand on existing principles.

It goes back to the old adage that understanding the problem is the first half of the solution.

The American Society for Training and Development and university recommendations are both good starting points for finding qualified trainers and consultants.

Word of mouth also is an excellent method of locating an appropriate match. Success stories that show tangible results typically spread quickly across industry networks.

Businesses in the market for professional development training should contact previous clients of targeted consultants to determine if their services appropriately address the challenges at hand.

"Nothing we do is off the shelf. Often, training is perceived as a commodity. While we can deliver skill-building programs, our aim is to partner with the client to deliver breakthrough results that exceed their

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