

Achieving a Win-Win: “Business Makeover” Program Helps Entrepreneurs Kick It Up a Notch

By Robin Madell

Small to mid-size business owners face many common challenges. In a quest to improve performance and increase profits, owners and managers must continuously clear a wide range of hurdles—from ensuring solid internal and external communication, to building a stellar marketing platform, to perfecting both leadership and customer service.

Companies that find ways to successfully manage these details, by identifying trouble spots and nipping problems in the bud early on, have improved chances of graduating from good to great. Those that don't may find themselves failing to grow and thrive. Research shows that only 39 percent of businesses become profitable over the life of the business, according to the National Federation of Independent Businesses. And according to the U.S. Small Business Association, roughly half of all small businesses fail within the first five years.

But as a business owner, it can be difficult to see the forest through the trees. There are a host of reasons for this, including the fact that many entrepreneurs of small to mid-size businesses are embroiled in the daily details to such a large extent that they've made themselves indispensable to their staff. While this offers employees some short-term benefits, it can also pave the way for future disappointments. Would your business be able to survive, much less thrive, without you in it?

If the answer is no, you may want to revisit the way that you're managing it. A study from The Eisen Agency showed the top two reasons that businesses fail to reach their profit goals are based on spending too much time on non-core competencies, and failing to ask for help. In his book *Small Business Management*, Michael Ames adds a more surprising reason for small business failure: unexpected growth.

If you're spending too much time in the trenches, shoulder to shoulder with the teams you've hired to help you handle certain functions, then you'll have a difficult time taking on the type of leadership role that's required for your company's long-term success. If your company is on the verge, or in the midst, of a growth spurt, your business could be equally vulnerable. By the same token, if your company's growth isn't what you know it could be, you might want to consider reaching out for help to identify and modify what's holding your business back from the next level.

The Opportunity

Reuters recently reported that a number of successful entrepreneurs attribute timing as the key to their good fortune. That means knowing when to reach out for help, and when to seize on an opportunity that could make a major difference to your organization's bottom line.

If your company were offered the chance for a “business makeover” today, would you take it? That's what Ember Carriers wanted to find out when it launched its premier promotional event, the \$100,000 Business Makeover. The answer, they discovered, is that many forward-thinking companies would jump at the chance.

Ember Carriers—a leadership development group based in Cincinnati and the area's leading provider of Insights Discovery® organizational assessment tools—partnered with four other professional services organizations to donate \$100K of services to local businesses in the tri-state region. The primary goal of the promotion was to provide deserving local businesses with the strategies and tools needed to create a more effective and profitable workplace.

The desire and need for these services quickly became clear, as more than 100 businesses applied and vied for the chance to win. For its contribution, Ember Carriers offered to guide winning companies through their unique challenges in a wide range of areas including:

- Company culture
- Leadership development
- Workplace communication
- Team effectiveness
- Employee engagement, morale, and motivation
- Efficiency and continuous improvement

The Winner

When the smoke cleared, label and package printing specialists Innovative Labeling Solutions (ILS) emerged a winner. Started in 1996 by a family partnership in a suburb of Cincinnati, ILS has since evolved into a full-service label and packaging company in a 65,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art facility.

The company, which began as a conventional commercial printer, is now known for its innovative approach to new technologies, having led the industry as an early adopter of digital printing technology for labels and flexible packaging back in 2005. ILS has kept this investment in high-tech among its strategic focuses, continuing to grow the digital printing segment every year since then. The company also boasts strategic alliances with some of the world's top tech companies, including HP, AB Graphic International, and Esko.

ILS marketing director Kathy Popovich sheds some light on why the company has been able to experience its current level of success: "It's our sales process and value proposition," says Popovich. "We get to know clients and their business in order to offer branding solutions, not just printing—what is the future of your brand and how can we help you get there? We also endeavor to become actively involved early in the design process—not just execute what others have designed."

While these steps helped ILS reach and maintain its present position as a North American industry leader, the company was clearly poised for additional growth as it celebrated its 15-year anniversary at the end of 2011. Management team members—led by president

Jay Dollries and VP of sales Eric Knop—were not content to rest on their laurels.

In fact, ILS leadership had already started exploring ways that the company might address its upcoming challenges. Options included the possibility of working with local government agencies, partnering with universities, or hiring other consulting services. The timing was thus perfect to have won the opportunity to work with Ember Carriers.

Dollries and Knop were well aware that marketplace realities due to the faltering economy put many small to mid-sized businesses and manufacturers at risk—including award-winning companies like ILS. In the label and packaging industry, these risks were compounded as the industry continued its shift away from more traditional and conventional technologies toward digital printing—an opportunity that management wanted to continue to find new ways to leverage.

While ILS was among the first companies in the world to have three digital printing presses on the floor of a single facility, along with that distinction came the need for additional resources, including training and development to expand on this potential and vision. "Our value proposition wasn't to convert existing clients, but to develop that offer organically, sharing those benefits with that marketplace," explains Popovich. "What is possible with digital that is not possible with traditional print? How can we make the market aware?"

Questions loomed on a larger scale as well. What steps should the business take to get to the next level? Which areas should they focus their overall organizational development around to ensure the ability to hit the ground running with new initiatives? In order to get to the next level, ILS knew it would take work.

"One of our goals was to emerge stronger out of this economy and not wait until the economy adjusts to us," says Popovich. "We wanted to remain in a leadership position when the economy came back around. Continuous improvement will keep us at the front of the pack." It was from this point that ILS began working one-on-one with Mary Hladio, president and founder of Ember Carriers.

The Experience

As a first step to the “business makeover” opportunity, Hladio conducted an extensive site visit to ILS, for the purpose of meeting with the leadership team and understanding the company’s business and unique challenges before proposing a plan.

The Ember Carriers’ approach to organizational performance and leadership development emphasizes that it’s ineffective to slap on a “one size fits all” approach, such as those available through a catalog of courses from a “corporate university,” standardized e-learning tools, or leadership training courses that have not been designed to address a company’s specific challenges.

“You need to understand what’s going on inside your organization in particular before you can determine how best to fix it,” says Hladio. “A cookie-cutter method that assumes what works somewhere else will work for your company won’t work.”

Popovich describes her view of the starting point of this process: “Mary brought the whole package. She communicated and connected well with everyone at ILS on their own terms and in their own language. She’s insightful, thoughtful, and can read between the lines. She was able to very quickly put something together for us.”

Following the initial site visit, Hladio administered the Insights Discovery® personality profiles to both ILS employees and the leadership team. The profiles are designed to provide information about each participant’s key personality traits in several areas, including strengths and weaknesses, management style, interactions with others, motivational factors, and barriers to effective communication. ILS found the feedback from the personality profiles to be eye-opening and useful, setting the stage for the work to come.

Based on ILS’s identified growth strategies, the next step was to define the future-state competencies that the company would need to implement in order to support this growth. Hladio tailored each competency to

define key behaviors required for success, incorporating ILS language and terminology. With the results from this “competency library” in hand—as well as the results from a 360 survey—Hladio zeroed in on specific areas for development and action, creating a master plan to guide her recommendations.

With the company’s strong focus on technological innovation and process development, one area that Hladio pinpointed for ILS to continue to focus on is employee development—particularly in relation to ensuring that customer service keeps pace with the company’s rapid growth rate. “Investing in technology is easy,” says Popovich. “Investing in people is equally important and must be ongoing for the long-term health of the organization. Employee development is a journey of continuous improvement.”

To that end, Hladio helped facilitate a strategic shift of a key company position, based on a particular challenge that the leadership team had identified. ILS wanted to transition its sales representatives—previously called “customer service representatives”—to become true “client managers.”

Along with the title shift came a functional one—the client managers would become more consultative in nature and really “own” their accounts, shifting the role from a production focus to a client focus. “Our customer service team found a new voice and it really inspired other departments,” says Popovich.

Hladio helped the leadership team identify development opportunities under core competencies, and from that vantage point, management was able to successfully roll out the restructuring to the teams. As part of the process, Ember Carriers provided workshops designed specifically for the new position. With Hladio’s help, the newly empowered client managers left her workshops with confidence to achieve their increased responsibilities, which included direct involvement in customer problem-solving.

The Take-Aways

Responding to change can be especially hard at the organizational level—for any business of any size.

Often, management teams face resistance from staff to proposed changes, even when everyone agrees that it's important to problem-solve differently.

But as companies learn new strategies, management is often better able to verbalize those problem-solving skills—even if they haven't historically done so. It takes time for new learned behaviors to integrate across an organization. But when companies take the time to do it right, the entire organization can become that much stronger.

These days, “doing it right” in terms of organizational performance, team effectiveness, and leadership development often means seeking assistance from an expert third party. As Popovich explains: “I wear many hats and it's hard to have one more thing to take care of. We needed someone from the outside helping us figure out what to do. Bringing in human resources training, leadership development, and other areas that we weren't fully invested in told us that we didn't have to reinvent the wheel.”

When it comes time to choose an outside partner to help you evaluate and improve your organization's performance, it can be difficult for small to mid-sized businesses to know where to turn. The Goliaths of the business world are widely catered to—but what about the Davids, who may one day be Goliath-sized too?

Ember Carriers caters to businesses that are on their way up, but could use a leg up in getting there—particularly those with a proven track record of success. “Any business that is on the cusp of incredible growth should work with Ember Carriers,” says Popovich. “We love that even though we're small, we finally have the tools in place to take on big opportunities. Small to mid-sized businesses can greatly benefit from working with her, because of her strategic approach and her passion.”

Ember Carriers specializes in providing tailored learning and performance solutions to fit each company's unique requirements. It's a system that works: “Mary customizes her presentations and examples to fit the audience with whom she is working, as opposed to other consultants that just recycle the same old slides,” says Popovich. “She really tries to understand the business so that people are able to

figure out examples and real problems that they need to deal with, that are applicable to the organization.”

Popovich says that Hladio's work with ILS will continue to have a large impact on the organization, and will play a vital role in future growth and success. “Our growth depends heavily on our work with her,” says Popovich. For starters, training and development based on core competencies—as successfully initiated with the new client managers and sales department—will be rolled out to all other divisions, including prepress, production, and the executive team. Additionally, ILS was so pleased with their free business makeover that they have extended an ongoing partnership with Hladio.

ILS identifies the following outcomes of their initial work with Ember Carriers:

- Identified training opportunities throughout the organization, starting with the sales team
- Empowered employees and addressed customer needs from their perspective
- Helped fine-tune, move forward, execute, and internalize the company's mission and vision
- Invested in results and truly partnered in helping ILS to grow

“It was a good jump start for us and a great experience,” says Popovich. “No matter what the time was it took to get it done, Mary was willing to push us forward. She's been more than a consultant. She's become an adjunct of our organization and you can tell that her passion is for our success.”

Robin Madell has spent two decades as a writer, journalist, and communications consultant on business, leadership, career, health, finance, technology, and public-interest issues. She has interviewed over 200 thought leaders around the globe, and has won 20 awards for editorial excellence. Robin serves as a speechwriter and ghostwriter for CEOs and top executives, with a specialized focus on women in business. She is also a contributing writer for *career-intelligence.com*, *The Glass Hammer*, and *Evolved Employer*.

Mary Hladio is the president and founder of Ember Carriers Inc., an organizational performance consultant based in Cincinnati, Ohio. As the name suggests, Ember Carriers aims to reignite the fire in individuals and organizations so that they are more profitable and enjoy more rewarding work experiences. Ember Carriers' philosophy is happy bosses + happy employees = success. Visit www.EmberCarriers.com for more information.