

DO YOU THINK AN SBA LOAN

Raise the ceiling

How to get the biggest bang for your executive leadership course bucks

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When it comes to executive leadership training, Andy Bailey subscribes to the 80/20 rule — and the 85 percent rule. Eighty percent of what participants learn won't apply to them, he says, and 85 percent of participants won't apply what they learn.

"They'll come back, work will hit them in the face, and they won't implement," he says.

Despite those odds, Bailey is a big believer in leadership programs. As CEO of Franklin-based NationLink Wireless, he used the Entrepreneurial Masters Program to achieve "better revenues, happier people and more time." He sold NationLink last year and now, as CEO of his Rock Habits business coaching venture, "absolutely" recommends leadership training to his clients.

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"Every business hits a ceiling where it can't grow any faster," he says. "The only way to grow faster is to get more knowledge."

Like Bailey, Arnie Malham invests heavily in education, attending speaker-driven events like Verne Harnish's Fortune Leadership Summits and longer, more interactive courses like the EMP, which is run by held at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

While both entrepreneurs say leadership training helped them grow their companies, they say preparation and follow-through are critical for getting a return on what can be a considerable investment.

A three-year program, the EMP requires a commitment of time as well as money. That alone attracts dedicated participants, Malham notes. So does the retreat-like programming, which includes speakers, personal coaching and experience-sharing among the 75 business owners selected to attend each year. Because participants meet as a class, there is built-in accountability, which can be helpful to entrepreneurs, notes Bailey, who completed the EMP in 2005.

"They're used to holding other people accountable, but holding themselves accountable is a very different thing," he says, adding that most EMP classes meet yearly even after completing the program.

Preparation is also built in with the EMP, which sends participants stacks of advance reading. But even with a leadership conference that is open to the public, Malham recommends reading the speakers' books ahead of time, which helps attendees absorb the message.

Because summits are more inspirational than instructional, Malham comes armed with a notepad to capture his ideas. "The notes are half about what I'm hearing and half what come to mind as I'm hearing it," he says. Bailey says he attends a summit about twice a year "for energy" and will hear some speakers a second time so he can gauge how well he has implemented the message.

Both men warn against trying to implement too many ideas; Malham limits himself to three. And he resists the urge to unveil them to employees.

"That's a recipe for disaster," he says. "They weren't there, they didn't hear it, they don't understand it. They're busy working, and all you're doing is creating more work. It's about little steps ... slowly adding the ingredients to what becomes the new stew."

The team at the Scarlett Leadership Institute shares that philosophy. Attendees of its weeklong courses wrap up their time by assessing what they have absorbed and setting a limited number of goals.

"By the end of the week, they know themselves pretty well and they know where to devote their energy," said Mary Fink, the institute's vice president of program development. "They're not trying to do 15 things."

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