

The Alternative Board concept is coming to Cheyenne

TAB groups peers to help business owners

By Dennis E. Curran
Business Report Editor

CHEYENNE – For many small or medium-sized business owners, finding advice and help when they run into a question or a problem can be a daunting challenge. Most of them don't have boards of directors, and hiring consultants can be expensive.

Enter Bill Martinec and Greg May and some of their peers, and chances are they can help. As business owners themselves, Martinec and May have been there and done that, and now they are in the process of organizing groups of peers who can advise and support each other.

Their solution is called The Alternative Board, or TAB Board for short, and it is designed to bring together business owners into boards of their peers for help in solving mutual problems and advice on how to grow a business.

Martinec and May are both successful business owners and certified facilitators and coaches with The Alternative Board, a national organization that is based in Westminster, Colo. Both hail from Fort Collins and are anxious to establish at least one TAB board for business owners in Cheyenne and southeast Wyoming.

"Right now, with the economy the way it is, it's not a time to be alone," says Martinec. "Business owners need somebody to talk to, they need a sounding board."

That's the basic concept behind TAB. Business owners band together in groups of six to 10 and meet monthly with a facilitator like Martinec or May to talk about mutual problems or to zero in on a specific issue one of the group members is having. The boards are screened so that competitors are not members of the same group, and the rules require that everything said at the meetings is held in confidence.

"It's business owners talking to business owners, and we facilitate the sessions," Martinec explained.

TAB also includes a business evaluation and one-on-one coaching by the facilitator, who helps business owners identify issues, set goals and measure their attainment. There's also a national hotline for hard-to-solve questions or problems that might be beyond the expertise of the local board or facilitator, but most often the solutions are close at hand.

According to Martinec and May, businesses have much more in common than their owners realize. As many as 75 percent to 80 percent of their problems have nothing to do with their products or services but revolve around managing employees, cash flow, technology or effective use of the business owner's time.

"People say, 'my industry is different,'" May said, "but once they get together, they see that 80 percent of all issues are

TAB Board informational meetings

Wells Fargo Bank
701 Capitol Ave., Cheyenne
Tuesday, June 16
11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Thursday, June 18
11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.

common. But the board can help you get a whole different look. Basically, it gets you thinking out of the box."

That was the goal of TAB founder Allen Fishman, when he established TAB in St. Louis in 1990. He later moved the organization to Colorado and franchised the concept in 1996.

Today, more than 300 TAB Boards operate around the country and internationally, and the organization has more than 200 certified facilitators and coaches.

Now Martinec and May are anxious to bring the concept to Cheyenne. They are meeting with local business leaders and planning two informational luncheon meetings in Cheyenne in June. (The luncheons are scheduled at Wells Fargo Bank from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Tuesday, June 16, and Thursday, June 18.)

Depending on interest, they are looking at starting one or even two TAB boards in Cheyenne and southeast Wyoming.

Actually, TAB is not completely new to Cheyenne and Laramie. Rick Rothwell, now with Manufacturing Works, helped start one four years ago with three members from Cheyenne and three from Laramie, but it did not last. Martinec and May believe the time is right to launch the TAB concept again.

"We'll explain the concept in informational meetings or one-on-one meetings and find out if people want to try it," Martinec said. "Is this right for them? Are they right for us?"

Many small business owners want to take their businesses to that next level, he said, but they often don't have the time to do it.

"They want to be working ON their business instead of IN their business," he said, and TAB can help them find ways to do that. Most businesses developed a business plan to get financing when they are starting, but existing businesses need a strategic plan to keep going and keep growing, and TAB facilitators are trained to help business owners in developing strategic plans and setting and meeting goals.

One key area of focus is helping business owners find ways to differentiate their business from their competitors. Another is to help businesses find ways to not only survive tough economic times but thrive in them.

"We have a passion for helping people," said Martinec, who has headed several large businesses and currently heads The Martinec Group, his own consulting firm in Fort Collins.