

# Growth STRATEGIES

## At boot camp, firms learn how to be all they can be

By ADINA GENN

**A**s the owner of Bohemia-based Island Acoustics, a provider of acoustical ceilings, drywall and carpentry, Bob Weber watched in frustration as sales reps and estimators bickered while the company tried to put on a united face to bid on jobs.

That's not all. Union carpenters and foreman felt left out because they didn't have a forum to share their expertise during project planning.

Something had to be done, Weber said.

But it's not easy to find time to lay the groundwork for change, especially when there's a business to run. That's certainly a dilemma business owners encounter as their companies grow.

In 2003, about year after the company's partners sought help in bringing structure to business meetings, Weber decided to expand on that idea with 20 Island Acoustic employees for a three-day boot camp offered by the same consulting firm, Huntington Manor-based Knowing Point.

At boot camp, a cross section of administrative and warehouse employees, along with estimators, foremen and executive personnel, met for three 12-hour Saturdays, spaced three weeks apart. The sessions, which started at 7 a.m., included breakfast, lunch and dinner.

The first meeting took place in July 2003 and focused on how employees operated under favorable and unfavorable conditions. In one exercise, participants were asked to complete a puzzle – although unbeknownst to them, some of the components were not there. In another, employees had to convince a colleague to drink soymilk altered by food coloring.

These tasks will help leaders resolve conflicts and handle change in the workplace, said Eric Hieger, Knowing Point's vice president.



**SHAPING UP:** Island Acoustics owner Bob Weber (seated) turned to a corporate boot camp operated by consulting firm Knowing Point when he needed to improve his firm's intra-company communications. (L-R) Eric Heiger and Robert Ebers of Knowing Point.

For the most part, participants played along.

Still, skeptics asked, "What does this have to do with putting up drywall?" Hieger recalled. But others saw the rationale and expressed it, he added.

In the next two sessions, employees and management identified shortcomings in the company.

Among the requests: improve the way projects are staffed. For instance, a foreman's talent and pay shouldn't be wasted on labor that a lesser-earning apprentice could handle. Also, fore-

men were assigned the same lead carpenter throughout a job, and that created critical continuity.

Even smaller tasks, like the process of taking coffee orders, were changed. Before, workers would order at job sites, which caused workers to stop work and take out cash. An improved concept: the orders were to be processed when workers collected their tools at the day's start.

Another team addressed equipment inventory, pinpointing cost savings in item replacement versus repair. Overall results: Profit savings of \$2.7 million, Weber said. "Last year was the best year that I can remember in two decades."

Despite Island Acoustics' success with the program, boot camp is not for everyone, cautioned Ira Krause, a principal at Great Neck-based management-consulting firm Weston Partner.

Employees that can't handle the introspection probably won't get as much out of the process, he said.

Weber agreed. And though he opened the boot camp to all employees, he strongly encouraged attendance from those he felt would enhance the process.

In April 2004 participants met one last time and gave final reports. An awards ceremony followed.

Now Weber grooms participants who showed themselves as leaders at boot camp to grow with the company. Some of the company's leaders of tomorrow live far from Bohemia – upstate, or Pennsylvania for example – and they can find jobs for Island Acoustics in those markets. That's not something the firm could do before.

But perhaps even more important, the company was able to identify and fix its own trouble spots, Ebers said.

### Tips of the trade

- Enhance employee communication skills.
- Identify company shortcomings.
- Determine how to repair losses.
- Incorporate these findings to bring a company to the next level.

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