An urban arts outreach program takes new and creative risks

Barbara Alexander is a woman of passion – for the arts, and for her local community. Her business, the Performing Arts Academy of Connecticut, specializes in Theater, Dance, Music and Art. With a consortium of state-certified instructors and professional teaching artists, they offer over 55 different arts programs to schools, daycare centers, senior centers, social, civic organizations and arts in the community. Among their many initiatives, they run a talent competition for homeless artists, teach inner-city youth, and mentor people living in group homes.

When Barbara joined MicroMentor, she was overwhelmed. She was working around the clock, but felt like all of the money she made was leaking out of the business.

On MicroMentor, she connected with Christine Hawkins, an Australian-American employee of HP Inc, specializing in e-commerce in California.

Christine focused on getting Barbara organized – stopping activities that were creating a drag on her business, and focusing on revenue-generating activities. Barbara likes how Christine lets her make her own mistakes, but is always there to support and guide her when she trips up.

Christine had previous experience mentoring young women in technology. She feels that mentoring somebody from a completely unrelated background was different.

She tells us, “Mentoring a small business owner is a lot more personal – I mean, this is their income. Mentoring is different than coaching because there is a lot more listening, and a lot more guiding. I am not giving advice. I am helping them find their way. People are sometimes afraid of mentoring in a space they don’t know anything about, but we can still help.

Small business owners can become overwhelmed by the day to day, we help bring them up to a helicopter view of their own business.”

One major change to Barbara’s business strategy was adding an outreach offering – which brings the arts to her students where they spend their time – including after-school programs and retirement homes. This not only makes arts education more convenient, but oriented Barbara’s business toward greater social impact.

When I asked Barbara what Christine’s key contribution was, she told me “Christine has taught me to stop, write down, analyze, organize and execute my plan of action. You do not have to do everything all at once because it will not all get done.”

Barbara has gained a greater sense of clarity, which in turn has allowed her to work a normal 40-hour work week. Despite working fewer hours, she is actually making more money, and has now moved her business from a $3,000 to a $5,000 square foot space.

“I have had nothing but major success with Christine. Barbara tells us, “I put information given to me into play, and saw growth immediately. My mentor has been a major blessing to my business, which went from red to black in six weeks! When we met, we had 1 or 2 accounts, and now we have 20 accounts. By the end of next year, I’ll probably be in the $100,000 club.”

Christine didn’t know quite what she was getting into when she started mentoring, but now she has a sense of pride, and sees how it has helped her to grow as a professional, and as a person.

She tells us, “Employees need to see outside of their own space in order for them to grow. Barbara has made enormous progress, she now knows how to prioritize. She only needed my encouragement and not my advice.”

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