

Plateau *pains*



Good businesses grow naturally, until they don't.

Many landscape company owners find their initial success stalls, leaving them struggling to break through a plateau and reach the next level.

Bill Silverman, owner of Springboard Business Coaching, offered executives "The Keys to Breaking Through to the Next Level While Working Less" during his presentation at the Professional Land-care Network's Green Industry Conference in Louisville, Ky., in October.

Some business owners blame the economy for their lack of growth, but that simply allows them to "take the responsibility off their shoulders," says Silverman. He offers tips for leaders to take matters into their own hands.

Business growth happens in spurts, he says. Companies grow quickly and then that growth levels off for a period of time. Using broad strokes, Silverman divides a business's growth into three categories:

Phase 1: Up to \$250,000—where the owner does as much as he or she can to get the business to grow. The plateau usually comes between \$150,000 and \$250,000. An owner's next goal is usually \$500,000.

Phase 2: Between \$250,000 and \$1 million—the goals are expanding the business and becoming a well-oiled machine. The plateau usually comes north of the \$500,000 level.

Phase 3: More than \$1 million. The goal for these business owners often is "to be a market leader," Silverman says.

Periods of stagnation are common in business. Here's how to reach the next level. **BY DAN JACOBS**

The plateau typically comes between \$1 million and \$2 million.

The first step in breaking through the plateaus is to know why the plateaus happen, Silverman says. One of the most basic reasons for an inability to move to the next level is owners don't set a good foundation on which to build to the next level.

Think of it like a student's progression through math, he suggests. First you learn to add and subtract and then multiply and divide. You don't start off with algebra and calculus. Business is no different. An owner needs to build on fundamental skills—marketing, sales, team management, financial management, service delivery, etc.

"What you do on one level leads to the next," Silverman says. "At each level the same challenges happen," but different skills are needed to be successful, just like there are different skills needed to complete high school and college. "Different level; different devil," he says.

Phase 1 business owners tend to be the "be all and end all" for their businesses, he says. They handle crew management, finances, marketing, spend time in the field and the list goes on. To move to

Phase 2, the owner has to transition from a doer to a manager. At some point some of those responsibilities must be handed over to others. The owner needs to focus on selling and marketing the business.

"If you don't switch your role, you will learn there is too much work," Silverman says.

By the time a business owner reaches Phase 3, he or she shouldn't be working anymore, Silverman says. "Work must be done by other people."

When most business owners hit a plateau, they "hunker down" and start working harder. They come in earlier and stay later. But at some point, it's like pouring water into a full glass, he says.

Silverman offers the following techniques to break through a plateau:

› **Triage:** Like in a war movie in which the most seriously wounded soldiers are treated first, business owners should start by addressing their most critical problems. Look at the foundation and assess which areas are the weakest.

› **The post-up:** Bring your team into a meeting room and let them help you find your broken areas. "They see



things you don't," Silverman says. Give everyone in the room a stack of Post-it notes. Have them write one broken process down on each note and let them write until they're done. Put the notes on the wall by category—marketing, selling, schedule prep, etc.

This way you start to recognize where the biggest problems are. A good question to ask at this point is, "How much money are we leaving on the table with all these broken issues?"

► **Systemize:** Start developing solutions, begin testing them and turn successful solutions into procedures you document. Eventually you will have a procedure manual to run your business.

Are you the bottleneck?

To move to the next level, a business owner also must build a self-sufficient team.

"If you can't do that, it's game over," Silverman says.

Many business owners fall into what he calls the "growth trap." The owner begins the day with a list of high-level growth issues, but after getting the crews out in the morning, one crew calls and needs something left behind. The owner drops it off and decides to check on the other crews while he's out. He makes a couple of calls between stops. At the end of the day, he realizes he hasn't completed half the items on the list.

"You end up being the bottleneck," Silverman says. You're not able to grow

your business because of that. That's why you need self-sufficient crews."

The first step to create self-sufficient crews is to create job descriptions. Showing employees what their roles are helps them do their jobs better. It also helps when it's time to evaluate employees, give feedback and coach them.

Once the processes are in place, a business owner doesn't need to manage every aspect of the business.

"The process of growing your business, is a process of letting go," Silverman says. **LM**

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