

Able Information Technologies, Inc

Aligning Technology Solutions with Strategic Business Goals

Start-ups get boost from boss

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After working at Able Information Technologies for three years, Debbie Long no longer wanted to be just an employee.

She had great confidence in the business and wanted to increase her income, so she asked to buy into the Chandler-based information-technology service provider.

But Able President Brandon Ames said no, explaining that being an entrepreneur is more than simply investing in a company. It is about creating.

So he threw out a bold idea: Why not start a new company together?

And that's how they formed Strategic Technology Communications Inc., an information-technology equipment-leasing company, in 1999.

Since then, Ames has spun off another company with a different employee and is working on a similar deal with a third employee.

That's unusual in small businesses.

Many bosses have a difficult time giving responsibilities to employees or sharing profits, said Loui Olivas, who teaches entrepreneurship at the W.P. Carey School of Business at Arizona State University.

"They like to keep the company close to the vest . . . so for an entrepreneur to spin off companies with employees, it's not only unique but extremely exciting," Olivas said.

Just how many do it is difficult to say. Olivas has yet to see any studies on the subject. But he calls it a wonderful strategy.

"It's a great way to hold on to employees. (An owner) knows the strengths and limitations of the employee."

Nor has business counselor John Henry Smith seen many employer-employee partnerships. In some family businesses, the patriarch will spin off a restaurant or a new store under the management of a grown child. In those cases, it's more of a marketing strategy, said Smith, who provides business-planning assistance through the Maricopa Community Colleges' Small Business Development Center.



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In the case of Strategic Technology Communications, Ames said he invested with Long, a key employee since 1996, because of her value to his company.

She "has been a dedicated employee focused on the success of whatever she is working on," he said. "I can always count on (her) commitment, and, as an entrepreneur, that is incredibly important."

Together they came up with the idea to start an equipment-leasing company. Long had experience at a company that offered equipment leasing. Able had clients who could benefit from leasing information-technology equipment. So Strategic Technology Communications was born.

Long, who is Strategic Technology's president, liked the fact that Ames wanted to partner with her. She didn't want to go into business alone.

"A lot goes into owning a business," she said.

Ames views his business partnerships as investments in his employees' strengths.

"You can't be smarter than all of your employees," he said. "If I have to be the end-all, be-all of the company, I'm really messed up."

A year ago, he started Sky Development, a real estate company, with his director of engineering, Jon Hardin.

"It is very much in its infancy but is continuing to grow and develop," said Ames, who added that the company has two small properties under development.

Ames says he didn't always look at his employee relationships the way he does today. Mentors set him straight about building strong teams and letting them work to their strengths while he managed and nurtured them. Ames, who started Able in 1993, sees himself working on other ventures with budding entrepreneurs at his company.

Long appreciates the mentoring Ames has provided.

"We didn't have a lot of business to start with," recalls Long, who invested a "minimal" amount of cash and a lot of sweat equity.

With Ames' guidance, the company adjusted its strategy to stay viable.

Instead of leasing computers and other information-technology equipment, Strategic Technology decided to lease bandwidth, which allows data to be transmitted. The idea developed after an Able client needed high-speed Internet access, but the infrastructure in the client's part of Bullhead City only allowed for a dial-up connection.

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Leasing bandwidth gives clients wireless connections even in rural or newly developed areas that lack high-speed infrastructure.

"Dial-up wasn't going to be acceptable in a school full of middle school teens," she said. That's how the idea to lease bandwidth developed.

"The timing for that customer was just right," she said. The company quickly added customers, including schools and developers. A small number of competitors have since come to the market, but few exist in Arizona, Long said.

Business is growing. Long is private about numbers but said sales doubled in 2005 and are on track to nearly triple this year. The company recently won a contract from the Arizona Department of Health Services to provide redundant Internet access as a backup system.

Long can't help but smile about the opportunity created with the help of her boss.

"I don't have to apply for new positions every two years now," she said. And "I have plenty to learn about growing the business."

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