

‘PLATO™ is like an MBA without the book learning’

When Barbara Brown volunteered to become a facilitator on a business development programme she had no idea it would turn out to be a life-changing experience.

Five years ago, as HR director of a large company in the Dorset area, Barbara was invited to a meeting to learn about PLATO™, a peer group learning initiative that was being introduced into the UK after running successfully in Europe for more than 12 years.

The programme, which was being run by Business Link, was designed for chief executives and senior directors in companies with 10-250 employees and turnover between £1.5m and £39.5m. The many thousands of businesses already helped through the programme cited benefits such as an average 34% increase in turnover, a 50% increase in new business and a 50% improvement in key management skills.

Each PLATO™ group comprises 12-15 members who meet once a month for two years to address a wide range of management issues – problem-solving in groups or working alone with one of the two or three senior executives from blue



Barbara Brown, Director, Effective People UK Ltd

chip companies who take the role of facilitators for each group.

Barbara explains: ‘I was asked to attend the meeting to learn more about the programme so that I could suggest potential facilitators from my company. However, when I went along I was so impressed by what appeared to be a really exciting initiative that I realised I’d actually like to become a facilitator myself.’

Once she became involved it was clear that the reality of the programme lived up to her expectations. A group facilitator’s role encompasses organising the meetings and ensuring they take place, delivering on the participants’ expectations, visiting their businesses to gain deeper insight into specific issues and organising specialist speakers.



A “Virtual Board” experience

‘It’s a unique programme that provides companies with a “virtual board” experience,’ said Barbara. ‘People who run companies often have issues which they can’t talk about even with their own directors. Within the PLATO™ group members can discuss sensitive matters in a confidential forum and receive help from their peers, share best practice, develop their business skills and get access to specialist expertise.’

Members draw on their own experiences to help one another create effective strategies for profitable growth, enhance management skills, increase new business opportunities and develop confidence, decision-making and risk analysis.

Barbara found that an unforeseen bonus from her experience was that she got as much from the programme as the members.

‘The facilitators are all volunteers who take part because they recognise the importance of peer learning and the contributions they can make as senior executives from large organisations. For example, virtually all the companies in my group had HR issues at various times and my experience in this field proved particularly useful.’

‘As facilitators we also get to learn about all the issues involved in running a successful company and get a much broader understanding of business.’

‘So, although we gave our services voluntarily we also benefited from a free business education.’

She believes the PLATO™ programme is ideal for senior business people who enjoy developing their skills and knowledge but have limited time and resource.

‘This is a highly practical programme which is like an MBA with all the case studies but without the book learning,’ she said. ‘It adds significant value as those who take part become much more rounded, with so much more to offer their companies.’

If further proof of the programme’s effectiveness were needed, Barbara’s subsequent decision to leave her job and set up her own company provides it.

‘I ran my own business once before but it wasn’t a great success,’ she said. ‘However, the two years I spent as a facilitator and the lessons I learned in that role gave me the confidence I needed to go it alone and I now run a successful HR consultancy.’

For more information about the PLATO™ programme and for details about how to become involved either as a Group Facilitator or participant contact Jenny Dobson, e-mail: info@platogb.co.uk