

Case study: Sheboygan County Chamber

Although originally designed for second-stage entrepreneurs, the PeerSpectives Roundtable System has also proven successful for managers of similar departments in noncompeting organizations. In fact, the Sheboygan (Wisconsin) County Chamber of Commerce runs roundtables for eight different audiences: nonprofits, sales, finance, workplace safety, human resources, wellness, supply chain logistics and small business owners.

“PeerSpectives is a protocol that really works,” says John Rogers, who facilitates six of the Sheboygan County Chamber’s roundtables. The combination of individuals with similar responsibilities, discussing challenges in a confidential environment, and using a structured format produces surprising results, he observes. “There may be some problems that can’t be solved in a single session, but you can still see the mood in the room shift dramatically in a positive direction by the end of the meeting.”

Jay Garlieb, who participates in the chamber’s workplace safety roundtable, cites commonality as a big benefit. “You wonder if other companies have to deal with some of the same issues we do — and as it turns out, they do,” says Garlieb, a quality and safety manager at Mayline, an office furniture manufacturing company in Sheboygan.



Garlieb’s company has been growing quickly, and in any manufacturing environment there is always an inherent tension between increasing production and maintaining safety, he says. One of Garlieb’s takeaways from the workplace-safety roundtable has been discovering an online tool that projects how injury costs can affect profit margins — along with what kind of increase in sales will be required to make up the loss. “Looking at those numbers helped us make the decision to hire more workers,” Garlieb says.

Regardless of whether or not the roundtable is processing one of his issues, Garlieb derives considerable value. “In fact, I now look at the production floor differently and see the potential for injuries in locations I might not have considered before.”

Lynn Potyen, owner of The GameBoard, a specialty retailer of educational card and board games, is a regular at Business Owners Success Strategies (BOSS), which is the Sheboygan County Chamber’s roundtable for small-business owners.

“There’s great value in seeing that I’m not the only one with a problem, and that my reasoning for doing things are very similar to other business owners,” Potyen says. “I’ve gotten great feedback on how to address different challenges that my business is going through. The roundtable also helps me be proactive. I see where other people are having difficulties and go back to my team and discuss how we can avoid the same problem.”

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Dave Hoffman, another BOSS participant, appreciates the formal structure of the roundtable. “Instead of a casual networking event with speakers, this is more like an open training session — except the training comes from your fellow trainees,” says Hoffman, general manager of Sheboygan Squared, the city’s business improvement district.

“The roundtable allows for greater knowledge,” he says. “A speaker may give you some good takeaways, but with the roundtable you’re able to dig deeper, ask more questions and really discuss the pros and cons.”

Hoffman has nearly 200 property owners in his district and 90 percent are commercial entities. The roundtable gives him ideas that he can share with those constituents to improve their businesses. For example, Hoffman points to one roundtable session that focused on advertising where participants shared what worked — and equally valuable — what didn’t work for them. “That’s important since today there are so many different marketing venues,” he points out.

The chamber’s nonprofit roundtable is particularly strong, and members come from a wide variety of nonprofit organizations including some with retail operations, community food programs and senior centers — and even the performing arts.

“Although our organizations may be structured differently, we have a lot of common ground about funding issues, volunteer issues and how we use resources,” says Craig McFadden, a staff member at RCS Empowers Inc., which is a rehabilitation center for people with disabilities. “The roundtable not only helps us solve these problems, but also helps us strengthen each other by finding ways to raise our recognition in the outside community.”

In addition to using PeerSpectives to help members, the Sheboygan County Chamber has applied the methodology to its own staff meetings. “Because the format gives everyone a voice, it helps participants become more engaged and better understand each other’s issues,” says Jane Brill, a staff member who facilitates the chamber’s wellness and supply chain roundtables. “The first time we tried the format, it completely transformed the discussion, and when people left, they said it was our best meeting in years.”

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Note: The Sheboygan County Chamber offers PeerSpectives roundtables in conjunction with the Wisconsin Small Business Development Center at Green Bay.



About PeerSpectives: Developed by the Edward Lowe Foundation, PeerSpectives is a unique roundtable system designed especially for leaders of second-stage companies. Roundtables typically involve eight to 12 CEOs from noncompeting industries and are led by a facilitator who has been trained in the PeerSpectives protocol. The system revolves around confidentiality and experience-based learning rather than giving advice.