

Going for Growth - The Leicester Shire Mindset - Mary Irving, Chief Executive, Tangible Results

I have been asked to talk today about 'going for business growth'. This is not because I know all of the answers but, as Managing Director of an SME, I do have insight into some of the challenges faced when making the decision whether one should actively seek growth in ones business.

In the context of the meeting today it is fair to say that a growing local economy is one where businesses are generally growing within it. My own Company Tangible Results is a business services company providing B2B Telemarketing Services to both private and public sector clients.

Business Services is a sector of the economy that is predicted to experience significant growth over the next decade and beyond. Tangible Results has experienced steady, organic growth since its inception in 1994 now employing around 30 people.

As the MD, I am faced with the challenge of deciding whether it is best to work within our current boundaries or, should we plan for significant expansion. I am sure I am not the only MD facing this challenge as I believe this is typical of the experience of many similar sized companies. It is not an easy decision to reach for a busy, hands-on Manager.

To reach a decision, one not only has to assess and balance the risk of significant expansion against the potential return on investment. Then, one has to consider what resources are required? Premises, Staff, Finance, Knowledge, Transport Links, and most importantly for a tax paying business, whom, from the publicly-funded, business support sector, is out there to help? How does one ensure that it doesn't all go horribly wrong?

The first thing to bear in mind is that growth is relative. It can be just as worrying for a plumber to take on a mate as it is for a larger organisation with it's own in-house Accountants, Lawyers, HR Professionals and Bankers to embark on a world-blazing trail of expansion. But, with in the region of 96% of companies employ less than 50 people many business leaders do not have these resources on tap, and face the challenge alone. So where can we go for help?

I want to explore whether in Leicestershire we truly have the right climate to support and motivate businesses. Is there a palpable feel of optimism and vibrancy that will increase the confidence of companies to develop and grow or, is there a downbeat feeling of doom and gloom, where we feel that we are victims of policies and actions, over which we have no control?

The purpose of today is to open up discussion about the things that influence our success in the economy, and what we require from those agencies whose remit, and allocated budgets, are about influencing stability and growth in the region.

So who are these Agencies? We can talk about the RDA, EMDA, LSC, LSEP, LA's, etc. etc. Confused? Well I'm not surprised! Who are these people? What exactly are they trying to achieve? and for what purpose? By the time most SME's have found out the answer they will either have run out of steam, or, become so frustrated that that they will go it alone, or not do anything at all.

So, how does the average businessperson influence the provision of business support services to ensure that it can, and will, make a difference? Perhaps the best way is to become involved. I personally sit on a number of Boards including the Chamber of Commerce and Leicestershire Education Business Company. By doing this, I gain a better understanding of some of the influencing factors affecting the business climate. It would be nice to think that my views as an SME are heard, and sometimes even listened to.

Also, being the MD can be a lonely road, so being able to share ones experiences with other likeminded people is often the best way to reach a conclusion. The greatest advice often comes from someone who wears the tee shirt.

There are several key individuals in Leicestershire who dedicate a lot of time and have a positive influence on the business climate, but I think as business people, we can all contribute more, given the right mechanism for consultation. But we need to know that someone is listening and that our efforts are not wasted. Otherwise what's the point? There is a lot of untapped energy, creativity and experience out there in the business

community. We need to find ways to make them feel welcome and show recognition of the value they can provide.

The trouble is, that it is all too easy for a vibrant group of individuals to evolve into a mutual appreciation society, where the individuals therein are cautious about challenging the views of the majority. Consequently an emperor's new clothes syndrome evolves.

We in Leicestershire need the help of organisations that are brave and represent the views of the business community. Unfortunately, these same agencies are often challenged by unrealistic government targets and, as the survival instinct is quite a strong one, they can end up by just providing services that tick boxes rather than making a real impact.

Let's stop it now! Those of our community leaders who have direct access to highly influential government representatives, stop saying yes, tell it how it is! Eventually, someone may listen. That way, business support programmes could be well thought out, and evaluated in a no-blame culture that will uncover the true successes and unfurl the failures.

There has been a trend, in recent years, to make public sector organisations more business like and to encourage them to run their operations in a similar way to how commercial business are run. This has become a significant measure for success. But, what if the desire for the success of the organisation becomes greater than the desire for the success of the businesses they support? –who wins? -Probably, no one in the long run.

What about our three excellent universities? Are we really driving the levels of collaboration that help business gain access to their amazing resources, ideas and expertise? Do universities understand what businesses want? Are they in touch with how the average SME operates, or are they purely connected with the large Corporate. Are they setting graduate' expectations at the right level, encouraging them to be realistic about their goals both in terms of salary and prospects?

I think universities have the resources and power to create new worlds. Sometimes, it seems that new ideas are contained within the university emanating in commercial, university owned, ventures. But, is it not better for graduates to be the Trojan horses of innovation and empowerment in the wider market?

As a county, in which to grow a business, I am pleased to say that there is much to celebrate here in Leicestershire. The regeneration of the city is well underway, and already, one can see a new skyline of hope. This year, as in the last 14, the Leicestershire Business Awards highlighted a wealth of innovators, entrepreneurs, vision and ambition. We can all learn from them, share their good practice, raise our confidence and enjoy the prospect of business growth. Why? Because if we don't, somebody else will!