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## Small Business Builder: The Book of Success

### How a High-School Dropout Turned a Bookstore into a Booming Business

By Mary Campbell

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Love what you do. Embrace the community. Treasure your employees. Love what you do. Pay attention. Get out of the way. Accept the fact that you'll make mistakes. Learn from them. Love what you do.

This is part of the wisdom that helped Bob Schlesinger turn "Dad's little bookstore" into a \$20 million company □ Tucson-based Bookman's Used Books, Music and Software □ with 6 locations and about 250 employees. It's wisdom he gladly shared during his stint in February as entrepreneur-in-residence for the University of Arizona's Berger Entrepreneurship Program at the Eller College of Business and Public Administration.

Part of the job included a group session with the student entrepreneurs, whose business plans he had scrutinized during the previous two days. The next day he met individually with student teams to discuss their business plans. He also offered follow-up sessions in his office to students who wanted more time to tap his experience.

□ Learn What You're No Good At □

Bookman's has been a fixture in Tucson for more than 25 years □ since Schlesinger, a high-school dropout, took over his father's small bookstore in central Tucson. There wasn't even a cash register, Schlesinger recalled □ "just a metal box."

But these days, Schlesinger is a local celebrity. He appears in many of Bookman's no-nonsense TV commercials, opening with his trademark "Hi, again, Bob from Bookman's." Business owners' starring in their own commercials can be risky, but Schlesinger's TV gig has been a hit. "The ad agency told me, 'You're just the kind of weirdo who will do well on TV,'" Schlesinger said.

Almost from the start, Schlesinger prized enjoyment over exertion. He "could have had more stores," he confessed, if he'd worked longer hours. "But it's more important to have fun while you go along," he said. "The important thing is to show up every day."

Not that building Bookman's has been one big party. "I worked at the counter for years and years & and years and years. There have been times when I would have sold [the store] for a hundred bucks," Schlesinger confided. The business really took off, he said, when he "got out of the way."

"Learn what you're no good at," he advised his captivated audience. "I'm lousy as a day-to-day manager. I'm an idea person. So I hired people to do things I couldn't do & and things I didn't like to do."

□ Fix It Later □

Schlesinger's opening remarks at the group session were brief □ lasting all of five minutes. He said it was humbling to be advising college seniors and second-year MBA students who had been immersed in

business fundamentals for at least the past two years.

"I'm a self-taught jack-of-all-trades," he said. "I'm intuitive. I sit and watch. I pay attention to what's going on □ my business knowledge is mostly from my mistakes."

For most of the group session, Schlesinger answered students' questions, ranging from "Why doesn't Bookman's buy college textbooks?" to "What's the key to your success?" Here's a sample of the wisdom he dispensed during the hour-long Q-and-A:

On competing with the "killer B's" (Borders and Barnes & Noble): "We've gone out of our way to make Bookman's a community place," Schlesinger said. The store has lots of comfortable chairs and encourages people of all ages to "hang out there." On a slow night, Schlesinger said, one of the stores might bring in pizza or chips and salsa for the customers; or "we might ask if there's anyone who can sing their high-school song." Those who can get freebies.

On community involvement: "Tucson is a better place to live because of Bookman's," Schlesinger said, and he wasn't talking only about the friendly ambiance at the city's three Bookman's locations. Bookman's and the Schlesinger Foundation have donated hundreds of thousands of books to halfway houses, jails, nonprofit organizations and schools. They've supported literacy programs, bought shoes for children and supported animal rights as well.

On employee retention: "It takes years to become good at buying [used books, music and software]," Schlesinger explained. The same people buy, stock and price the products; most are college graduates. In addition to their wages, employees receive a bonus based on store profits. They get four weeks of paid vacation, and the company matches their 401(k) contributions.

On egotism: "Most of our problems [have resulted from] me getting in the way & not listening & being arrogant. Now I let people smarter than me do their jobs."

For his part, Schlesinger said, some of the best business advice he got came from his dad, who said not to agonize over decisions because most of them would be wrong anyway. "Dad said, 'Do it; fix it later.'"

Do you have business-success secrets you'd like to share? Please e-mail a brief description of your business and its successes to [smallbiz@gravity.biz](mailto:smallbiz@gravity.biz)

An editor since the age of 6, when she returned a love letter with corrections marked in red, Mary Campbell founded Zero Gravity in 1984 to provide writing, editing, marketing and other services to small businesses. Her presentations and workshops address small-business topics from Web sites to business writing. An editor of and contributor to dozens of publications (books, journals and newsletters), she is co-author □ with her sister, Pippi Campbell Peterson □ of the second edition of *Ready, Set, Organize! A Workbook for the Organizationally Challenged* (JIST Publishing, 2001). Please e-mail her your comments, questions and suggestions at [smallbiz@zgravity.biz](mailto:smallbiz@zgravity.biz).

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