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## **Sustainability Circles a New Option to Catapult SMEs**

Iowa State Bank president sees potential in going green to change entire business model

A new approach is available to support small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to get ahead of the curve, save money, help the environment and gain new market share.

The Fowler Center for Sustainable Value, an arm of Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management, is launching the first Ohio sustainability circle consulting project this month.

The center is partnering with True Market Solutions, a San Francisco-based consultancy with a vision to "transform America's small and mid-size enterprises into thriving businesses by guiding them to fully embrace sustainability in their operations and cultures."

Fowler Center manager Beau Daane says the project was sparked by a recognition of the growing opportunities for organizations to improve their financial performance by fully embracing sustainability business practices, but, a gap in support for SMEs to grab hold of these opportunities.

"The Fowler Center recognized that while many large Fortune 500 companies are making strides in sustainability, a lot of SMEs are being left behind," Beau tells *Axiom News*.

Distinct from traditional consulting services, the sustainability circles offer peer learning and a local action network on the one hand, and coaching and connection

to a national network of experts on the other.

Each circle brings up to nine organizations into a peer community meeting one day a month for six months, coupled with individualized coaching sessions.

At the end, organizations will have, among other outcomes, a completed sustainability action plan, a carbon footprint analysis, and a “strong business case for sustainability.”

“We feel that this new consulting approach is a tangible way to effect positive change in the business community in NE Ohio,” says Beau.

Beau says there has been interest so far from manufacturers, a public housing authority, community development corporations, large hospitals, county-level government agencies, a construction company, recycling company and real estate property managers.

The circles have been successfully prototyped in both California and Iowa.

President of True Market Solutions David Dubois refers to Iowa State Bank president Chris Grimm as an example of someone who’s found significant value in the circles.

While Chris was intrigued by the circle’s goal, he had the notion that for a bank, not much could be achieved, other than perhaps some energy efficiency upgrades and a reduction in paper use.

He’s since become convinced — especially after seeing a presentation from San Francisco’s New Resource Bank, an innovator in the field of finance and sustainability — that going green could potentially change the organization’s entire business model.

As an early step, the bank is in the midst of exploring how it might make significant infrastructure and operational changes, which are projected to both reduce costs and negative impact on the environment.

Beau says he’s excited to see this idea of embedding sustainability in organizations as both a force for good and for financial well-being gaining more traction.

He refers to the results of a recent survey of CEOs by the UN Global Compact, which showed the majority believe sustainability will tip in the majority of companies within the next 10 years.

The results underscore the notion that business can “be a force for good, for peace and for prosperity for all stakeholders,” says Beau.

Free previews of the circles will be offered next week, Oct. 12, 13 and 14. For times and locations, visit this [link](#).

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