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Since starting his own engineering firm in 1993, Mark McCleary enjoyed success and saw his Fort Myers company — Community Engineering Services Inc. — grow to 40 employees.

But something was missing. Enthusiasm and teamwork were hit-or-miss. Work usually felt like work.

Then, McCleary took the advice of a friend and attended a one-day seminar featuring Pembroke Pines-based business consultant Jack Lannom.

"I discovered something I have been searching for since I started the business," McCleary said.

McCleary signed up for a three-month curriculum offered by Lannom based on his book "People First" and hopes to complete it on Oct. 31.

Lannom gets down on the floor as he addresses Thursday a group of business leaders during a seminar at the Sanibel Harbour Resort. He said the change in the atmosphere of his business is dramatic after weekly sessions for two months.

"I've seen several people change," he said. "I've changed."

Business consulting and coaching are a booming business in their own right as company leaders turn to seminars, best-selling books or one-on-one coaches to find a way to improve their business culture and the bottom line.

Some authors, consultants and motivational speakers like Stephen R. Covey ("Seven Habits of Highly Effective People) or Tony Robbins ("Awaken the Giant Within") have essentially become their own brand names.

Lannom recently held a full-day "boot camp" at the Sanibel Harbour Resort, drawing about 150 people at a cost of about \$250 each to learn about his "People First" philosophy. The approach advocates improving businesses by focusing on — and "celebrating" —

individual workers to improve morale and productivity and cut down on employee turnover.

The seminar had the energy — and the boisterous cheering — of a pep rally and Lannom even demonstrated his kung fu skills. But Lannom said the message behind the fun is serious.

"You can't have only a ROI (return on investment) focus anymore," Lannom said. "There is a SROI — a social return on investment — that you have to take care of. Our whole thing is if you take care of people first, the profits will come."

Citing U.S. Department of Labor statistics, Lannom warned that the cost of replacing an employee can be anywhere from two to seven times the annual salary of an employee to recruit and train their replacement.

Lannom said the Ritz-Carlton has signed up for his training for the company's two Collier County properties.

Seminar participant Jay Matey, senior project manager for Avalon Engineering in Cape Coral, said he expects the things discussed will bring positive changes.

"The lasting impact is going to be to integrate a more positive attitude in the office," Matey said.

Karen Mosteller, partner in the accounting firm Markham Norton Mosteller Wright & Co., said her company already uses many of the approaches that Lannom advocates, but appreciated the support.

"It just brings it all home and encourages you to keep going," she said.

Still, McCleary said he is a believer that changing your thinking can change your business.

"Before I started my own business, I was a project manager and I could focus on just my part of the business. But, as an owner, forward-thinking is part of my job description."