

# Arizona Daily Star

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## **Tiana Velez: Hiring help adds focus as tutoring service grows**

*Tiana Velez, ARIZONA DAILY STAR*

**SMALL BUSINESS MAKEOVER** A local business counselor offers advice/////Finding that perfect work-life balance isn't always first on the list of priorities for a solo entrepreneur. Debbie Rodriguez, who owns a tutoring business, knew the needed balance existed but did not have the time to achieve it. She wanted her business to grow, and sometimes logged 70 or more hours a week working on it. She wanted to learn how to build it the right way without risking burnout.

The story

In a written list of 10 things Debbie Rodriguez wanted to accomplish with her business, three revolved around the ideas of focus and vision.

As to-do lists go, it's relatively simple and honest, peppered with reflections of a business owner who hopes to overcome growth issues.

In 2003, Rodriguez formed Tutoring Solutions LLC, which started out as "just me doing math tutoring," she said.

Rodriguez had been a teacher with Tucson Unified School District for more than 10 years and later worked as an educational consultant for firms such as Misys Healthcare Systems and Prentice Hall.

When she finally decided to go out on her own, the plan had been to start small. Rodriguez chose to focus on providing one-on-one tutoring services for children in all subject areas. Prices depend on the type of package purchased; they run from four to 12 weeks and include two one-hour sessions each week.

Rodriguez handles the initial consultation with the family and, depending on children's specific academic needs, will assign them to one of her 10 associate tutors or handle it herself. In either case, the family will have weekly consultations with Rodriguez over the phone to make sure things are going well.

Eventually Tutoring Solutions expanded into a full-service tutoring agency, offering programs for adults and providing small-group sessions. But getting there wreaked havoc on Rodriguez's personal schedule.

"I worked all the time. There were no vacations, no set schedules or hours. There was no balance," she admitted. "The systems, they were there. But, I don't know, they were rough."

Rodriguez was full of ideas for programs she wanted to implement and ways to market the business. But she'd get bogged down by less urgent business tasks and lose sight of her goal. At times like those, she would question whether her business was on the right track.

"I'd think, 'Am I working on the things that I need to be working on?' " she asked. "I found that when I worked alone on my business, it was hard to stay focused and extend myself to greater potential."

Rodriguez had a business plan, but she needed to get things in order so she could develop it the way she wanted to.

The plan

"Because of Debbie's creativity, it was hard for her to keep track of all the different directions she wanted to go and the great programs she wanted to start," said Cheryl Vallejos, a business coach.

"As we started clarifying those goals, we slowed down enough to put them down in order," she said.

The process also involved determining which tasks needed to be done immediately and which could be handled by someone other

than Rodriguez. Delegating responsibility for administrative duties would allow her to better manage her daily work flow.

"Seeing how fast Debbie was growing her business, it was easy to work through the obstacle of time by hiring associates to help with the work load," Vallejos said.

When a small business is trying to grow, hiring more personnel - and taking on those added expenses - might seem counterproductive. But, said Vallejos, thinking you'll hire staff when you make more money is not necessarily the best move.

"You hire an assistant so you can make more money," she said.

The first step for Rodriguez was to hire an answering service to field phone calls. The service can take messages and answer basic questions about Tutoring Solutions' services. If necessary, it passes the call on to Rodriguez, who then schedules appointments and can provide more in-depth information.

Even this basic form of assistance helped Rodriguez streamline her day.

"She now controls her phone calls, keeps her personal calls after business hours," Vallejos explained. "By getting others to help in (some) areas, Debbie keeps moving on to the more important areas that bring in more revenue and builds her business."

That includes hiring more tutors - 10 so far, and counting. This has given Rodriguez considerable flexibility in offering Tutoring Solutions' services to more areas of the city and at different times throughout the day. That in itself has contributed to the business' growth.

With the added help, Rodriguez has been able to cut back her own tutoring hours, further allowing more time to focus on developing new programs.

In August, she'll start offering group sessions, held in a small conference nook at Javalina's Coffee & Friends, a cafe near her home base in Southeast Tucson.

Rodriguez is also planning to sell products such as tote bags and jewelry inspired by her business' themes of self-esteem and personal and academic success.

But first, she's taking a vacation.

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#### Profile

\* The business: Tutoring Solutions LLC, [www.tutoring solutions.net](http://www.tutoring solutions.net), 250-9014.

\* The owner: Debbie Rodriguez.

\* The services: One-on-one and group session tutoring for children and adults.

\* The challenge: Prioritize business tasks to bring balance to the business and to focus on its growth.

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#### Consultant

\* Cheryl Vallejos is president and CEO of Endorse Success LLC and Prime Leaders Community. As the author of four books on leadership and with more than 22 years of experience in business management, her mission is helping small businesses create big profits. She can be reached at 730-4456 or [cheryl@PrimeLeaders.com](mailto:cheryl@PrimeLeaders.com). For more information, visit [www.PrimeLeaders.com](http://www.PrimeLeaders.com) or [www.EnergyoftheMind.com](http://www.EnergyoftheMind.com)

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#### We can help

Are you a small-business owner facing a challenge?

If so, the Star's Business section has an offer for you: Get some quality advice free by participating in "Small Business Makeover."

Each Monday, the Star matches a small business with an experienced business counselor who discusses current challenges and

suggests a course of action.

Volunteer entrepreneurs must agree to talk frankly about their business issues with assigned counselors and not mind going public with that information. In return, the adviser will develop a specific plan to address challenges and help small businesses move to the next level. The counselors are experienced, professional advice-givers from Tucson's rich community of nonprofit and for-profit business counselors.

If you would like to be the subject of an upcoming makeover, contact Tiana Velez at 434-4083 or [tvelez@azstarnet.com](mailto:tvelez@azstarnet.com).

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