

Leaders program shows way

The State Government and top companies are mentoring Queensland's new wave of eager businesses, writes **Fran Metcalf**

SMALL business owner Karen Stanton is on the Premier's invitation list.

She networks with some of Queensland's most successful corporate operators and is currently clinching a deal with American aviation giant The Boeing Company.

"You would normally not get to meet those sorts of people as a small business owner," said Ms Stanton, co-owner and managing director of metal processing firm Heat Treatment Australia.

"After a while, they get to know you and recognise you. In business, that's just invaluable."

Heat Treatment Australia, based at Coopers Plains, was one of 25 companies selected from more than 300 to take part in the Queensland Leaders program last year.

The not-for-profit program, set up in 2006 by investment banker and now director James Paulsen, was created to help small and medium-sized private companies grow by providing expertise, funding and access to some of the state's most experienced and successful business people.

"SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises) are provided with free advice on issues such as capital raising, marketing, managing staff and how to grow," he says.

"Queensland Leaders is designed to give smaller companies an insight into the secrets of how larger, home-grown companies have become successful."

Each selected SME attends 10 forums, which include presentations by three Queensland Leaders sponsors, who represent 15 of the state's top professional service firms across a range of different sectors.

After the presentations, members get 10-minute private mentoring sessions with two of the speakers and are then invited to a networking reception where chief executives share experiences and anecdotes on the trials and tribulations of their own companies.

"The reason companies do Queensland Leaders is they identify they want

to grow but they need access to external expertise and they need to further develop their networks beyond their own industry," Paulsen says.

Each company pays \$13,500 for a three-year membership to Queensland Leaders. After the initial series of executive forums, networking functions and quarterly professional development programs are offered.

Paulsen says the program was originally created to enable privately-owned companies like Heat Treatment to remain on home soil.

"I was seeing everyday iconic Queensland companies being taken over or their head offices moving south," he says.

"A lot of that is because of a lack of access to funding, both equity and debt."

"Queensland Leaders works with companies like Morgans to identify a broad range of funding services."

But it's not all about funding, he says. By the end of the program, each organisation had the chance to make 15 new key professional service relationships.

Stanton says she received advice on how to market and promote Heat Treatment's move into the aerospace market as well as tips on improving customer service.

"We came across spectacular people at that program," she says.

"There are opportunities to gain access to business professionals you would not ordinarily get in a small business."

"We still have contact with quite a few of those sponsors who did the mentoring and still use them regularly for advice."

Flight Centre executive general manager Shannon O'Brien says he signed up as a sponsor because Queensland Leaders offered a large network of SMEs, many of which make significant yearly investments in corporate travel.

The State Government is also one of the sponsors.

"We've been there when the Premier, the Treasurer and the Federal



TOP ADVICE: Heat Treatment chief Karen Stanton with Queensland Leaders executive director James Paulsen.

Opposition Leader spoke and I'm talking to a room of 30 or 40 people," Stanton says.

"We also got to have a one-on-one conversation with them. I have contacts in their office now so I can ring them and ask advice on where to go for funding or resources."

"We often get invited to Premier's functions and I've been to a couple of private functions in the city with the Treasurer."

Paulsen says 47 companies have completed the program.

"We are currently going through the process of meeting with organis-

ations that have nominated themselves or been referred for next year's program," he says.

"We want a broad, diverse range of industry sectors but ones that also have a fire in the belly."

Nominations close October 14. Visit www.queenslandleaders.com.au

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