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Media 1 CEO part of Leadership Institute 2011

Pete Daly
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A familiar face will be on stage May 13 among the WOW — Women of Wisdom — at the Leadership Institute for Women at Davenport University: Chris Frederick Willis, CEO of Media 1.

All the WOW presenters at the Leadership Institute here and at another one in Livonia May 20 are Certified Women Business Owners with decades of business experience. The keynote speaker will be Melanie Burgeron, CEO of Two Men and a Truck, based in Lansing.

The Leadership Institute for Women is put on by the Ann Arbor-based Center for Empowerment and Economic Development, which is “committed to empowering women and minorities economically through business development training, supplier certification, business-to-business networking and accessible capital assistance programs,” according to the CEED website. The Leadership Institute in Grand Rapids is sponsored by Comerica Bank and the Small Business Administration in Michigan, with other local supporters that include Grand Rapids Opportunities for Women, Women in Successful Enterprises and Chrysler Corp.

The Women’s Business Enterprise Council – Great Lakes, an initiative of CEED, is a partner with the Women’s Business Enterprise National Council in Washington, which administers Women’s Business Enterprise certification. The certification helps women business owners procure corporate and government contracts.

The Leadership Institute is a statewide event, and it is not just for women. “Men can also attend,” said Kathi Boyle of CEED.

The space reserved for the daylong event at Davenport can only accommodate about 100 people, according to Boyle.

“I expect it will be full,” she said a week ago, adding that “quite a few reservations” had been received.

Willis, who was featured in this year’s Top Women Owned Businesses supplement published by the Business Journal, founded Media 1 in Grand Haven in 1993. Despite having suffered financial setbacks in 2008 as the recession worsened and “things went to heck,” she said the company now is “back up to where we were prior to the downturn. We’re in a growth mode again.”

Media 1 is a consulting firm with a staff of about 22, counting employees and a few contractors.

“We are experts in human capital improvement, which is really a form of HR,” said Willis.

Much of their work is with large corporations. “We create custom learning portals in SharePoint (software) for leadership and on-boarding,” she said.

Willis will speak May 13 and May 20 on “6 Mistakes That Could Keep You From Taking Your Business to the Next Level.”

According to the Leadership Institute website, her 18 years in business has enabled Willis to absorb “a few valuable lessons on what not to do in growing a successful second-stage business. She will share her insights into six things that commonly hold

women-owned businesses back from reaching their full potential, and offers tips to overcome these challenges."

Willis said these six common mistakes that business owners make can get in the way of getting to the next level.

One mistake is not turning to the right people to help advance the company, she said.

"Very often, the people who helped you start your business are not the same people who can help you grow your business," said Willis.

When a small company is established and growing, the owner needs people who can focus on certain specifics.

"You need more expertise in long-term messaging and marketing. You need folks with backgrounds in finance and benchmarking against other companies. Certainly you need HR folks and people who can handle the inevitable type of conflicts and things that are going to happen as you add more people," said Willis.

Also useful are individuals with a strong operations background to set up systems and processes for day-to-day functions of the company.

Entrepreneurs, said Willis, "tend to be interested in the big picture. But you need to back yourself up with detail people, and the corollary to that one is: Never hire in your own image."

"'Never hire in your own image' is a quote that I share all the time," she added, attributing it to Dee Hock, founder of VISA International, the credit card company. Hock is the author of "Birth of the Chaordic Age," a criticism of what he calls "command-and-control institutions."

Often, according to Willis, when small business owners are looking to hire, "we look for people we like and people who are like us, because those are the people we think we want to come to work with every day." However, Willis maintains that if the employees are clones of the boss, there will be holes to fill when it comes to getting the work done.

"I'm a big picture person, into the people side — an ideas person, a storyteller," said Willis. "I need people who are focused and have their heads down, who can follow processes and handle the details. Not only are they good at it, but they enjoy doing that — and I don't. So by hiring people like that, I'm not stuck doing day-to-day the things I don't enjoy. And they help cover the holes I might leave while I'm busy doing what I enjoy."

The people at her company are "a very diverse group of people ... with different attitudes and skill sets. That's not by accident; that's by purpose," said Willis.

She said Media 1 used to sell just learning products. Now it has new business in technology for creation of "robust learning portals using SharePoint."

Any business working in technology has to be prepared to adapt, she said. "What you are going to do three years from now may not be invented yet. It's a little scary, but you have to be prepared," she said.

Cost of attending the Leadership Institute for Women is \$90, which includes a continental breakfast, lunch, and what Boyle calls a "wine-down" evening get-together. To register, to go www.miceed.org.