



THEN DESIGN ARCHITECTURE (TDA)

Bob Fiala is the definition of entrepreneur. He had been working as a Senior Vice President at a large architectural firm in Cleveland, Ohio. As part of his position, he spent countless hours on the job and many days out of town. But he felt like he was just a cog in the machine. He felt a drive to branch out on his own and put that hard work and determination into developing his own firm. Of course, it took some convincing since he was a family man with young children to support. But after much soul-searching, he used his life savings to start Then Design Architecture in Willoughby, Ohio in 1989. And ever since then, it has been nothing but grow, grow, grow.

By 1993, he experienced his first growing pains, needing more space for his expanding staff and business. It was then that he had his first contact with the Small Business Development Center. He

wanted to utilize an SBA 504 loan to purchase a larger building. He worked with the former People's Bank on the former SBDC Haworth to get Then just five short again needed more to the SBA 504 loan partner at this time who had bought out Bank. He again help him with the the larger building he



lending side, and with Director Catherine through the process. years later, in 1998, he space and again turned program. His bank was FirstMerit Bank, the former People's turned to the SBDC to process of purchasing needed.

And in 2007, nine years later, he again needed more space for his ever-growing business. Instead of purchasing a new building, he decided to utilize space that was being used for a restaurant in his building and refurbish it into working office space. His first stop was FirstMerit Bank to obtain a SBA 504 loan and his next was the Small Business Development Center, this time with



then-director Allen Weaver. The work needed to clean up and rehabilitate the space was extensive. Years of grease and soot from the cooking area created a massive build-up of grime. The 504 loan provided the loans he needed to do the extensive clean-up and remodeling. And Allen Weaver was instrumental in helping him obtain the funds. Mr. Weaver helped him anticipate any roadblocks and other hiccups in the process and prevented them before they happened. This was his first 504 loan where approvals were not at the local level but in the SBA's Sacramento office. This

added to the time needed for closing the loan. However, having Mr. Weaver in his corner helped him get through the loan process smoothly.



Now that the space has been remodeled, tda now occupies the entire building. They have added a civil engineering firm, Greenland Engineering, that is also housed in the space. In addition, they have two branches off site, one in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and the other in Chicago, Illinois, that specialize solely in the hospitality industry.

ThenDesign Architecture has actually completed \$2 billion worth of construction in the last five years and has an additional \$250 million of business on the boards right now. They currently have 36 people on staff and are looking to expand their space yet again due to their booming business. And of course, Mr. Fiala is looking to doing another SBA 504 loan with FirstMerit Bank and with the SBDC in his corner when the time comes.

He contributes his success to a number of things, including finding the right staff in both their technical/design and personal skills to being willing to take risks. “Never underestimate your ability to succeed,” says Fiala. “You have to think big to be big, think small and you’ll be small.”

Another ability he believes has contributed to his success is the ability to manage risk. “When you’re first starting out, there are a lot of dynamics and risks involved. Learning to balance those risks is what will make you successful.”

Lastly, Mr. Fiala recommends sticking with a formula. “Once you have a formula to running your business that best suits your personality, stay with it through all your stages of business growth,” says Fiala.