

LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS GUIDE

A start guide for getting your own business off the ground

BUSINESS STARTUP GUIDE AND WORKBOOK

Veteran's Strategic Solutions LLC — Business Model Series

Before you read this

This guide works anywhere in the United States. Dollar figures are estimates from public sources, not quotes — and in this industry the published rate data is weaker than in any other business in this series. Part 3 explains why. Wherever there is a blank line, write in your own answer.

What this business actually is

A company has people who were good at their jobs and got promoted into managing other people. Nobody taught them how. You do.

You deliver workshops, programmes and coaching on leading teams, giving feedback, handling conflict, making decisions and holding standards.

What this is not: motivational speaking. A keynote is entertainment that lasts an hour. A leadership programme changes what somebody does on Monday, and the companies with budget know the difference.

Read this first — no barriers, and that is the problem

There is no licence for this business. No certification requirement. No equipment. No premises.

You could print a business card this afternoon and call yourself a leadership consultant. So could everybody else, and thousands have.

Which means the entire barrier in this business is credibility and access to somebody with a budget.

That is a genuinely harder problem than a licence. A licence you can buy with time and a few hundred dollars. Credibility with a corporate buyer is earned, slowly, and mostly through other people vouching for you.

Everything in this guide follows from that.

Honest gut check

- Can you hold a room of thirty sceptical managers for a full day? Not talk at them. Hold them.
 - Can you take a purchase order six months after the first conversation and not lose momentum in between?
 - Are you willing to be the second-cheapest option, not the cheapest? Companies distrust cheap training.
 - Do you actually have something to teach, or just experience to describe? Part 2 is about the difference.
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What the odds actually are

Approximately three out of four new businesses make it through their first year. About half are still running at five years. About one in three make it to ten — broadly consistent with U.S. Bureau of Labor

Statistics business-survival data.

Two honest caveats. Those numbers barely move by trade, and they count businesses with employees on a payroll, so a man working alone is largely not in them.

What is in your favour: near-zero startup cost and very high margins. Your costs are your time, materials and travel. A day billed at \$2,500 has almost no cost of goods against it.

What is against you: the sales cycle is long, the buyer is institutional, and your competition includes household-name firms with a hundred years of brand.

What separates the ones who last:

One programme done extremely well, not five done adequately.

A niche. Generalists compete with everybody. Specialists get called.

Repeat engagements. A company that runs your programme with three cohorts a year is a business. A one-off workshop is not.

Surviving the first eighteen months on savings or part-time income while credibility builds.

Snapshot

Money to start	\$500 to \$5,000, or \$2,000 to \$15,000 with methodology certification
Storefront needed	None. You work at their site.
Skill gate	Facilitation ability, which is not the same as knowing the material.
Licence	None.
Time to first paid engagement	Six to eighteen months, realistically.
Day rate	\$1,500 to \$3,500 independent, higher with specialisation.

Part 1 — The credibility problem

Nobody buys leadership training from a stranger.

An HR director spending \$15,000 of somebody else's money on a workshop is putting her judgement on the line in front of her leadership. If it goes badly, that is her problem, not yours.

So she buys from: somebody she has seen present, somebody a peer recommended, somebody with a recognisable methodology behind them, or a firm big enough that nobody gets fired for hiring them.

A new independent consultant is none of those things. That is the actual problem to solve, and it is solved by the three routes below.

Route 1: Be seen

Speak free, repeatedly, in front of the people who buy.

Chambers of commerce, industry associations, rotary clubs, professional groups, HR association chapters, nonprofit boards, conferences.

This is the primary business development activity in this trade and most new consultants do far too little of it. A forty-five minute free session in front of thirty managers is a room full of people who have now watched you work.

Route 2: Borrow credibility

Get certified in an established methodology. See Part 5. You are renting a brand and a validated framework until you have your own.

Route 3: Start where the bar is lower

Nonprofits, small businesses, associations, government agencies and franchise groups buy training with less procurement friction than a large corporation, and they will hire somebody unproven.

They also pay less. That is the trade, and it is worth making — because after six of those you have references, testimonials and a programme you have actually delivered.

Three groups I could speak to free this quarter: 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Part 2 — The veteran advantage, used properly

Military leadership experience is genuinely differentiated in this market, and there is an established sub-industry built on it. Firms staffed by former fighter pilots and special operations personnel sell leadership programmes to corporations at premium rates, and they do it because the experience is real and rare.

But here is the honest part, and it matters more than the advantage.

“I led soldiers” is not a programme

A corporate buyer does not want your war stories. She wants her supervisors to stop avoiding difficult conversations.

The experience is your credibility. It is not your content.

What you have that is genuinely valuable and transferable:

- Leading people who did not choose you and could not leave.
- Giving hard feedback to somebody you will see again tomorrow.
- Making decisions with incomplete information and owning the outcome.
- After-action review — a structured, blameless method for examining failure, and one of the most directly transferable tools you own.
- Delegation under real consequence.
- Building a team from people assigned to you, not recruited.
- Standards and accountability applied consistently.
- Operating when the plan fails.

Every one of those is a corporate problem. Your job is to teach the method, not to narrate the memory.

How to convert experience into content

Take one problem. Build one programme. Test it.

“Difficult Conversations for New Supervisors” is a product. “Leadership lessons from my career” is not.

Use one or two stories as illustration, never as the structure. The rule of thumb: if you removed every anecdote, would there still be a teachable method? If not, you have a talk, not a programme.

One thing to be careful about

Do not oversell the transfer. Corporate environments are not the military — people can quit, authority is softer, and consequences are slower. A facilitator who does not acknowledge that loses the room in the first hour, and rightly.

Say it yourself, early: “Some of this transfers directly and some of it doesn’t. I’ll be clear about which is which.” That sentence buys you enormous credibility with a sceptical group.

Part 3 — Pricing, and the honest state of the data

A warning before the numbers.

The day-rate figures circulating in this industry are largely unsourced. One independent training-cost site went as far as removing its own published facilitator rate table, stating that no association publishes a comprehensive external-consultant day-rate table and that many tables in circulation — including its own — could not be traced to any public survey.

So treat every number below, including the ones in this guide, as a rough market signal rather than a benchmark. Price from your own costs and from what your specific buyers actually pay.

What is reported

	Reported range
Independent trainer, live delivery	\$1,500 to \$3,500 per day
Senior trainer	\$1,500 to \$5,000 per day
Specialist — compliance, cybersecurity, executive coaching	\$3,000 to \$8,000 per day
US hourly benchmark for training providers	\$150 to \$199 per hour
Leadership content specifically	\$500 to \$2,000 per delivered hour
Compliance eLearning, for contrast	\$20 to \$80 per delivered hour
Instructional design consulting	\$100 to \$250 per hour
Executive coaching	\$200 to \$650 per hour

Note that roughly 25× spread between compliance and leadership. Content type is the single biggest determinant of price in this market. Leadership is at the expensive end, which is good news for you.

Programme-level pricing

	Reported range
Virtual half-day session for a group	\$5,000 to \$15,000
In-person workshop, experienced facilitator	\$2,000 to \$10,000 depending on size and customisation
In-person keynote, high-profile speaker	\$15,000 to \$50,000
Multi-day custom immersive programme	\$30,000 to \$150,000

Per-participant pricing

Online programmes \$200 to \$800 per person · multi-day seminars \$1,500 to \$5,000 per person · virtual instructor-led \$1,000 to \$5,000 per participant · public courses from established brands \$1,500 to \$3,000 per participant.

Context on corporate budgets

Companies spend approximately \$850 to \$1,250 per employee per year on training, depending on which survey you read — the figures conflict because the methodologies differ.

Leadership programmes are a multiple of that per participant. The money exists. The question is never whether the budget is there; it is whether you are the person they spend it on.

How to price your first engagements

Do not start at \$500 a day to win the work. In this market cheap reads as inexperienced, and you will never raise it with that client.

- Decide your target annual income.
- Assume 40 to 60 billable delivery days a year. That is a realistic ceiling for a solo consultant — the rest of the year is selling, developing and travelling.
- Divide. That is your minimum day rate.
- Check it against the ranges above.

Target income \$_____ ÷ 50 days = \$_____ per day minimum

Charge separately for: custom development, pre-work and assessments, follow-up coaching, materials and licences, travel.

Quote a programme, not a day. “Three half-day sessions with pre-work, assessment and a follow-up call — \$12,000” is a proposal. “\$2,500 a day” is a rate card, and rate cards get negotiated.

Part 4 — How companies actually buy training

Understanding this is most of the sales skill in this business.

Who is involved

- The economic buyer — usually a VP or department head with the budget.
- The L&D or HR contact — often your first conversation, frequently not the decision maker.
- The participants' manager — whose team loses working days to your programme.
- Procurement, in larger organisations, who will want insurance certificates, a W-9 and a signed contract.

A common mistake: spending months with an enthusiastic L&D contact who cannot approve anything. Ask early and politely: "Who else needs to be comfortable with this before it moves forward?"

When they buy

Budgets are annual and usually set in the quarter before the fiscal year starts.

If you are talking to somebody in month eight of their fiscal year, you are probably selling next year's programme. That is not a failure — it is the cycle. Ask when their planning happens and get in that conversation.

Why they say no

- No budget this cycle — timing, not you.
- They cannot articulate the problem well enough to justify the spend.
- Risk. Nobody was ever criticised for hiring the big established firm.
- They tried training before and nothing changed.

That last one is common and it is your opening. Ask: "Have you run leadership training before? What happened after it?" The answer is almost always "not much" — and the reason is almost always no follow-up, no manager involvement and no accountability.

Build those three things into your proposal and you are selling something different from what they bought last time.

What makes a proposal credible

- The problem in their words, from your conversations — not your generic description.
- What participants will do differently, specifically.
- How it will be reinforced after the session ends.
- What you need from them — manager participation, time, follow-up.
- A price for the programme, not a day rate.
- References or a pilot offer.

Part 5 — Certification in an established methodology

You can license somebody else's proven framework and deliver it under their brand and validation.

Established assessment and leadership methodologies offer facilitator certification — some are widely recognised in corporate L&D, and the well-known behavioural assessment tools include scoring, interpretation and certification components.

What you get

- Instant credibility. A recognised methodology answers “who is this person” before you walk in.
- Validated content. You are not defending your own model in front of a sceptical VP.
- Materials, slides and participant workbooks already built.
- Often a directory listing that generates inbound enquiries.

What it costs

- Certification fees, typically a few thousand dollars.
- Ongoing costs — per-participant materials, assessment licences, annual renewal.
- Margin. You are buying materials at their price and reselling them.
- Constraint. You deliver their programme their way.

The honest trade

Certification is a shortcut to credibility and a permanent tax on margin.

For a new consultant with no track record, it is usually worth it. It gets you in rooms that would otherwise be closed for years.

Build your own proprietary programme alongside it, and shift the mix toward your own content as your reputation grows. Certified delivery pays the bills; your own programme is the asset.

Part 6 — The first engagements

Nobody hires an unproven facilitator for a \$30,000 programme. Here is the actual ladder.

- 1. Speak free, ten times. Chambers, associations, rotary, HR chapters, professional groups. Forty-five minutes, real content, no pitch. Collect names.
- 2. Deliver three low-paid engagements. A nonprofit board, a small business, an association chapter. \$500 to \$1,500 a day. Not free — see below.
- 3. Get written testimonials and permission to use them. Ask at the end of the session, while it is fresh.
- 4. Convert one into a repeat. The same client, running the programme again with a different group, is your first real proof.
- 5. Then approach corporate buyers with references, a testimonial and a programme you have delivered nine times.

Do not work free

Charge something real even on the first one. Same rule as the rest of this series: free work is valued at what it cost.

Say the real number out loud: “My rate for this programme is \$2,500 a day. For this first one with your group I’ll do it at \$1,000 because I’m building references — I’d ask for a written testimonial in exchange.”

That is a trade, not a discount. It protects your price and it gets you the thing you actually need.

Where the accessible work is

Nonprofits and their boards · small business owners’ groups and franchise networks · associations and their chapter meetings · municipal and county government — supervisor training is a recurring need · volunteer fire departments and first responder agencies · school districts for administrator development · veteran service organisations · trade unions and apprenticeship programmes.

Government and municipal work deserves special mention. Supervisor training is a standing requirement, budgets are allocated, procurement is documented, and veteran-owned status can matter in ways it does not in the private sector.

Part 7 — Making it a real business

Sole proprietor or LLC. Filing fees \$35 to \$500 by state, about \$132 average nationally. Form the LLC — corporate clients will want to contract with an entity, and procurement often asks.

EIN — free at irs.gov, five minutes. You will be asked for a W-9 constantly.

Business bank account, separate from personal.

Insurance. General liability and professional liability (errors and omissions). Many corporate clients will require a certificate of insurance naming them as additional insured before you set foot on site — this is routine and your insurer handles it.

Taxes. Self-employment tax of 15.3% on net plus income tax. Quarterly if you expect to owe \$1,000 or more federally — April 15, June 15, September 15, January 15. Set aside 25 to 30 percent of net.

One thing specific to this business: corporate clients pay on their terms, not yours. Net-30 is optimistic; net-60 is common. Invoice the day you deliver and expect the money two months later. Plan the cash flow accordingly.

Startup costs are genuinely low: LLC and EIN, insurance, a simple website, materials and printing, and travel. \$500 to \$5,000 without certification, \$2,000 to \$15,000 with it.

Part 8 — Money help for veterans

VR&E, Chapter 31 — what is actually true.

The self-employment track is widely advertised as VA funding to start a business. The regulation requires that your service-connected disabilities be severe enough that self-employment is the only reasonably feasible career path for you. It is not a track you simply choose. As of August 2022, approximately 164 veterans nationwide were enrolled in the self-employment track, against more than 125,000 veterans using VR&E overall that year, per congressional testimony — it is a genuinely small slice of the program.

The long-term services track is different and far more commonly used. It covers vocational school, technical certificates and trade programs with no tuition cap, and can cover certification exam fees.

The catch: VR&E is an employment program, not an education program. If a counselor determines you can reasonably obtain suitable work with the training you already have, it gets denied. Anything funded must sit inside an approved individualised employment plan developed with your counselor.

Apply with VA Form 28-1900 and put the question to your counselor. Do not plan around a yes. A methodology facilitator certification is the kind of short credential worth asking about specifically.

Free and reliable to everyone, no rating required: Small Business Development Centers, SCORE mentoring, Veterans Business Outreach Centers.

Two things specific to this business. Veteran-owned small business status is worth registering if you intend to pursue government or municipal contracts, where it can genuinely affect who gets considered.

And if you were an instructor in service — a schoolhouse, NCO academy, drill sergeant, anything where you taught adults to do something correctly — that is directly relevant experience and most people entering this field do not have it. Facilitation is a distinct skill from leading, and you may already have both.

Part 9 — The three places people get stuck, and how to get past them

1. Selling experience instead of a programme

You have twenty years of leading people and it is genuinely valuable, so you build a talk around it and take it to companies. They enjoy it, they thank you, and nobody books a second one.

The problem is that stories are memorable and not teachable. A buyer needs to know what her supervisors will do differently on Monday.

The fix: pick one problem, build one programme with a method inside it, and use stories only as illustration. Test whether the method survives with every anecdote removed.

2. Waiting to be found

There is no licence, no directory, no inbound. So a new consultant builds a website, sets a rate, and waits — and eighteen months later has delivered two sessions to people he already knew.

The fix: speak free, ten times, in front of rooms containing people who buy. It is the primary business development activity in this trade and it is almost entirely unused by new entrants.

3. Pricing low to win the first corporate client

Five hundred dollars a day feels like a reasonable way to get in the door. In this market it reads as inexperienced, it attracts the clients who value training least, and you will never raise that price with that client.

The fix: hold a real rate and discount the specific engagement in exchange for something — a testimonial, a case study, a referral. Say the real number out loud every time.

None of these are reasons not to start. They are the three potholes in the road, and every one of them is avoidable if you know it is coming.

Part 10 — Your first 90 days

Days	What you do
1 to 15	Pick ONE problem you can teach a method for. Outline a half-day programme.
16 to 30	LLC, EIN, insurance, W-9 ready. Simple one-page website with the programme on it.
31 to 45	Book three free speaking slots — chamber, an association, a professional group.
46 to 60	Deliver them. Collect names. Ask two attendees what their own biggest team problem is.
61 to 75	Revise the programme around what you heard. Approach two nonprofits and one municipality.
76 to 90	Deliver one paid engagement at a discounted rate in exchange for a written testimonial.

The one number to track

Rooms spoken in.

Not revenue, not proposals sent, not website visits. How many times you have stood in front of a group of people who could hire you.

In a business with no licence and no inbound, exposure is the only reliable input, and it is the one thing entirely within your control.

Ten rooms in ninety days is a real start. Two is a hobby.

Month 1: ____ · Month 2: ____ · Month 3: ____ · Running total: ____

After year one, switch to: percentage of revenue from repeat clients. A company that runs your programme with three cohorts a year is a business. A string of one-off workshops is a treadmill with a long sales cycle attached.

Where this goes if it works

Solo, one programme, delivered often. Forty to sixty billable days a year at a real rate, mostly repeat and referral. No employees, no premises, and genuinely good income.

A niche you own. Manufacturing supervisors, healthcare managers, first responder leadership, family businesses. Specialists get called; generalists get searched for.

Certified delivery plus your own content. Their brand pays the bills while your programme becomes the asset.

Productised. A licensed programme other facilitators deliver, an online course, a book. This is how the ceiling on billable days gets broken.

Government and institutional contracts. Recurring supervisor training, budgeted annually, with veteran-owned status working in your favour.

The one-page version, if you read nothing else

- There is no barrier to entry, which means credibility is the entire barrier.
- “I led soldiers” is not a programme. Teach the method; use the stories only as illustration.
- Say out loud what does and does not transfer from the military. It buys credibility with a sceptical room.
- Published day rates in this industry are largely unsourced — one site removed its own table. Price from your costs.
- Independent trainers report \$1,500 to \$3,500 a day. Leadership content sits at the expensive end of the market.
- Assume 40 to 60 billable days a year, not 200. Divide your target income by that.
- Quote a programme, not a day rate. Rate cards get negotiated.
- Speak free, ten times, in front of rooms full of buyers. This is the primary business development activity in the trade.
- Start with nonprofits, associations, small business and municipal work. Lower bar, real references.
- Never work free — discount in exchange for a written testimonial, and say the real number out loud.

A last word

You spent years responsible for people who did not choose you, in situations where getting it wrong mattered. That is rarer in a corporate training room than you would think, and it is worth something real.

But nobody buys the experience. They buy a method their supervisors can use on Monday.

Build one programme. Give it away in ten rooms. Then charge properly for the eleventh.

This guide is a starting framework, not legal, tax or financial advice. Rate and pricing figures in this industry are notably poorly sourced — no association publishes a comprehensive external-consultant day-rate table, and at least one industry cost publisher has withdrawn its own rate table as untraceable. Treat all figures here as rough market signals rather than benchmarks, and price from your own costs and market. Corporate training spend figures conflict across surveys due to differing methodology. Tax figures reflect federal rules current as of September 2026. Startup costs are estimates, not quotes.

Startup Checklist

Use this checklist to turn the guide into a sequence of actions for your own market and circumstances.

- Choose the business structure you will use.
- Get an EIN and open a separate business bank account.
- Check business licensing, registration, and tax rules for your own city and state before starting.
- Confirm general liability and professional liability (E&O) insurance before accepting engagements.
- Build and pilot one programme with three free speaking engagements.
- Build the startup budget and record actual costs.
- Set your day rate and programme pricing using your own costs and target income.
- Prepare client proposal, contract and invoice templates.
- Launch outreach and record every lead, proposal and result.

Equipment and Budget Worksheet

List only the tools, materials, software and services required for the version of the business you plan to launch — for most readers this means a laptop, presentation software, workbook printing, a simple website and, if pursued, methodology certification.

Item	Required or optional	Estimated cost	Actual cost	Supplier or source
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Budget summary	Amount
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Startup total

Monthly fixed costs

Working cash reserve

Total funding needed

Pricing and Proposal Template

Complete the fields with your own numbers. Use the pricing guidance in Part 3 for the business-specific method — quote a programme, not a day rate.

Proposal field	Details or calculation	Amount
Client and engagement		
Programme design and customization		
Materials and participant workbooks		
Facilitation day(s) and rate		
Venue, AV or equipment rental		
Travel		
Co-facilitators or subject-matter experts		
Follow-up coaching or reinforcement		
Certification or licence fees (if applicable)		
Contingency or risk allowance		
Subtotal		
Applicable tax		
Proposed total		
Deposit and payment schedule		
Proposal expiration date		

Invoice Template

Business information

Business name:

Address:

Phone:

Email:

Tax ID:

Client information

Client name:

Company:

Billing address:

Phone:

Email:

Invoice number	Invoice date	Due date	Programme or engagement
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Description	Quantity	Rate	Amount
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Subtotal

Tax

Payments or deposits

Balance due

Payment method and terms:

Engagement Log and Lead Tracker

Record every inquiry, proposal, engagement and follow-up so the business can be managed from actual results.

Date	Lead or client	Source	Programme need	Proposal	Status	Next action
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Period	Leads	Proposals sent	Engagements won	Revenue	Follow-ups due
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Compliance and Business Notes

Leadership-programme consulting has no dedicated professional licence or trade-specific regulatory regime in the United States — unlike the other businesses in this series, there is no board exam, permit or inspection standing between you and your first client. That does not mean there is nothing to check. This page covers what genuinely applies.

- Business registration: form your LLC or register as a sole proprietor, and check whether your city or county requires a general business licence or a home-occupation permit if you work from home.
- Insurance: carry general liability and professional liability (errors and omissions) coverage. Corporate clients routinely require a certificate of insurance naming them as additional insured before you set foot on site — confirm this before you sign, not after.
- Contracts and procurement: expect to provide a signed W-9, a certificate of insurance, and sometimes a master services agreement before a purchase order is issued. Larger clients and government buyers may also require vendor registration.
- Methodology licensing: if you certify in an established assessment or leadership framework (Part 5), you are bound by that provider's licence terms — do not reproduce or resell their copyrighted materials outside those terms.
- Data and confidentiality: if a client shares 360-feedback data, assessment results or personnel information, agree in writing how it is stored, who sees it and when it is destroyed.
- Government or veteran-owned contracting: if you pursue municipal or federal work, confirm veteran-owned small business registration and any state-specific procurement requirements before you bid.
- Confirm business licensing, zoning and tax rules for your own city and state before starting — requirements vary by location even though there is no licence specific to this trade.
- Agency or authority contacted: _____
- Written confirmation or permit saved at: _____
- Review date: _____ Renewal or recheck date: _____

Launch Readiness

Leadership Programs Guide

PLAN

SET UP

PRICE

SELL

TRACK

Use the worksheets in this guide to record your own numbers, decisions and results.

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