

Free Business (owners)!

Remember the taste of freedom? That exhilarating but slightly scary sensation you had when you stepped out of wage or salary slavery and into your own business?

As business owners turn out the lights in the evening long after their last employee has gone home, after they've spent a day dealing with endless paperwork, perennial staff issues, difficult customers and clients, gnarly production issues, the question occasionally pops into their tired minds: How did I lose my freedom?

The simple answer is that it was taken from you, bit by bit, by the endless demands of running your own business.

Few of us thought that freedom was going to be free. Thomas Jefferson said that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance, but as business owners, these noble words only serve to remind us that we have to be everywhere, watch everybody, and know everything.

Many business owners feel like they've traded in a corporate treadmill for a home-made one. They're locked into what we call the "circle of sequels" – each year's results look much like last year's. They're still working the same long hours and aren't seeing as much of our family as they'd like to. Their health is OK, but it gets harder to muster the energy and enthusiasm they had when they started out. Their business results are OK, but they're not getting much closer to the financial freedom they dreamed about. The frustrating thing is they know they could get there if they could just get time to move the business forward rather than spending all their time treading water.

There are four main reasons why business owners end up in a circle of sequels:

Complexity: when we started out in business we had a great idea and a clear market. As we grew and became established, we added more products and services. We added more staff to keep up with demand, and with that came the inevitable complications associated with employing human beings – motivating them, managing them, trying to get the best from them. Of course we have to keep an army of public servants employed too. At the start we were bouncing one ball. Now we feel like circus performers trying to keep a dozen plates spinning on poles – and it seems the only person who can keep them all spinning is me.

Incongruent actions: our business outcomes are by and large a product of what we do, and what we do is dictated by what we think. If we still think about ourselves and our role the same way we did when we started, we'll still be doing many of the same things we did at the outset. We all know that if we keep doing the same things, we'll get the



same results. It's obvious. What's not obvious is what else we should be doing. And even if we can think of something else to do, there's no time to do it.

Incongruent networks: The customers we've served, the staff we've employed, the suppliers we've used are all part of what we might call the entrepreneurial network. Again, they're the people who've got us to where we are today. But are they the people who will get us to where we want to be? Chances are we need more and/or better customers, more and/or better skilled staff and even different suppliers to get the business to the next level. How do we go about doing that without putting today's business at risk?

The time trap: when we started, if we were lucky we had a little money, a few customers, and at least one good idea. The only thing we had plenty of was our time. So we used our time to make money. We sold the things we made ourselves until we could get into a position where we could employ staff to make them and sell them for us. Chances are, we still regard our time as the thing that makes us money. But in reality, our greatest value to the business is our capacity to think. Unfortunately, as long as we think time equals money, we won't be using our most valuable resource: our minds.

So how can we get ourselves free? Ironically, freedom requires discipline. We need to:

- Identify those things we do every day that we are good at, and that really add value to the business. Everything else has to be delegated. That means a lot of time upfront, because for most of us the way we get our hands off the business is going to be one finger at a time. We have to train staff and monitor their performance until they're performing the function at an adequate level. Of course they can't do it as well as us, but they don't have to: they just have to do it well enough for the purpose. The owner is the one who needs the most training: we have to learn to let go. This will simplify our lives as well as get us focused on the activities that give us growth
- Segment our clients into the "first fifteen, second fifteen, and the rest". Like as not, 80% of our profits will come from 20% of our clients. Some of our clients and customers actually cost us money when we take all the costs of service into account. To grow your share of "first and second fifteen" client/customer spend, you may have to jettison or reduce the service to C class customers. Better still, if they cost you money, direct them to your competition!
- Manage our time. There are a number of different approaches to this. The BizTime system involves the following steps:
 - Time Off: this is when we rejuvenate and recharge the batteries. Relaxation is not a reward for effort, it is a prerequisite to the energy needed to drive our business forward. Nominate a whole day, probably on the weekend, that will be completely free of business activities



- Time On: these Development Days are for building the business. They might involve training staff, planning, implementing new systems and processes – all the things that will create greater value further down the track, but that we are not investing time in now. Nominate a whole day or two half days
- Time In: This time for the emails, returning the calls, dealing with administration – all the things that clutter our days right now

All this is easy to say. While a few people get the idea and make all this happen by themselves, in our experience it takes time and discipline to change the programming of a lifetime. Over that time, most of us need a structure of accountability and review to help us focus on implementing permanent and significant change.

But if we want to be free again, the first thing we have to change is the way we think. Then we can build a business that works for us, not the other way round.

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