Run your business, instead of it running you.

Three things you can start fixing this week, and what each one tells you about your business.

Most owners don't have a time problem. They have a dependency problem. The business runs through them, so it can only move as fast as they can.

Here are three things you can start this week. None of them take long, and you don't need to finish them to get the point. What matters is what happens when you try. Each one points straight at whatever is really holding the business back.

01 Start getting out of the way

The number one roadblock to a healthy, growing business is that the owner has become a bottleneck for the entire operation. Every major decision and function flows through them, and if they aren't available for even a couple of days, things start to get backed up. Your company, or your life, will never be what you want it to if everything depends on you. The owner's role should be strategic, not operational.

First, make a list of things that only you know how to do. Pick one, document the process, train someone else how to do it, and make it their responsibility.

Next, make a list of the decisions that always come back to you. Pick one, and delegate it to the right person. Not the tasks or functions, the actual authority to make the decision without coming to you.

Congratulations. You've just taken two things off your plate, and given your business the ability to breathe just a little bit easier. Now, over the next few weeks, make it your goal to empty those two lists. Keep only the most critical decisions, and nothing that affects day-to-day operations.

And if you make these lists and truly feel you don't have anyone to hand these things off to, then you have found your first major problem.

02 Get your key numbers on one page

Find five numbers that are most critical to your business that you can look at weekly, if not daily, and get them on a one-page dashboard with a process to update them. What these are will vary depending on your type of business, but you need a combination of past, present and future-looking metrics. Here are four that apply to almost any business.

NOW **Cash on hand, and weeks of runway.** This is the lifeblood of your business. A cash flow forecast is probably the most critical report an owner can look at. It determines how well you sleep at night.

PAST **Revenue, gross margin and EBITDA vs budget.** Week, month, quarter and year to date. Have you achieved what you planned, what was the variance, why, and how does that affect the future? Gross margin matters more than the top-line revenue number.

PRESENT **Backlog.** If you stopped all new business, how long would it take to service your existing commitments? Too small, and you're at risk of running out of work. Too large, and either customers are waiting too long or your team is running too hot.

FUTURE **Sales pipeline.** What's coming in, and when? What that pipeline needs to be varies depending on the type of business and your close rate, but you need to get a handle on what's coming so you can prepare.

Your fifth is the one specific to your business. A service-based business probably cares about billable utilization, recurring revenue, unbilled work in progress. A product-centric one cares about inventory on hand, turnover, supply chain backlog, returns. The major point though is not to go crazy. Your one-page dashboard should keep it at a high level so you only have to drill into the details when there are problems showing. If there are 20 numbers on it, you won't take any of them seriously.

One more thing.

Try to actually fill in your five this week. If you can, you're ahead of most owners. If you can't, the numbers you couldn't get are the point. That's not a spreadsheet problem, it's a business that can't see itself clearly, and it's the first thing worth fixing.

03 Get honest about your top customers

Most businesses earn the majority of their profit from a minority of their customers. But sometimes your best customers aren't the ones you think.

Make a list of your top 10 to 20 customers and sort them by gross margin, not revenue. Then consider the sales and admin effort each one takes, and try to put a number on it. Even at the same margin dollars, there's a huge difference between a low-maintenance, agreeable customer and one who grinds you on every quote, calls three times a week, complains about every delivery, and then pays three weeks late.

Getting real about the true value of your biggest customers can be an eye-opening exercise. Once you have the real picture, you know which customers you should be putting your energy into, instead of the ones you probably are. I'm not saying fire the high-maintenance ones. But maybe you ease off them a little, and spend that time figuring out how to do more business with the good ones.

Then imagine extending this across your whole client list. I promise you'll find customers you're losing money on once you account for everything.

As a bonus: if any one customer is more than 15% of your business, that's concentration risk and you need two plans for it. Not the plan to keep them happy (you'd better already have that one), but one to grow everything else and dilute your reliance on them, and another to survive if you lose them anyway.

What to do with all this

Each of these takes an afternoon to start and a few weeks to finish, but the value shows up immediately, in what you run into. No one to delegate to. Numbers you can't pull. Customers quietly costing you money. Those walls are the actual work.

That's what I do. I help owner-run businesses get out from under the day-to-day and build something that runs, and grows, without running through them.

If you hit one of those walls this week, it's not a setback. It's the conversation we need to have.

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