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The truth in black & white about

**Dealing  
with a  
loss of**

**control  
and  
visibility**

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# As a business grows it is increasingly difficult to retain full control and visibility of every function... **or is it?**

**Often the biggest constraint on the growth of SMEs is the personal philosophy and attitudes of the owner. Arguably, the most common attitude I encounter among business people is the fear of losing control. For that reason, many do not want to grow much beyond their current size.**

Like many attitudes, the concern is real, but that doesn't mean it has to be true. We all know the consequences of uncontrolled growth. 80% of businesses that fail have had a record turnover in the previous 12 months. They go under because they run out of cash or they simply crash and burn, unable to deliver on their promises to customers.

Growth unquestionably causes loss of control when it is unconstrained.

When you start a business, you are effectively the equivalent of a one-man band. You are responsible for sales, client service, new business, HR, recruitment, finance...everything. Whilst stressful, there is also a comfort in the fact you know the buck stops with you and you alone are in complete control of your destiny.

Surrendering elements of the initial dominant control is a necessity if you are committed to growth. The process of accepting you can't do it all will take you out of your comfort zone and it won't be without bumps in the road.

I firmly believe however that rapid growth and retention of control aren't mutually exclusive and maintaining visibility of the critical business measures is achievable, regardless of the company size or aspirations.



Black & White  
insight #1

**Growth causes loss of control  
when it is unconstrained.**

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# One of my **biggest sources of amusement** during my time in professional services was the business plan.

**Management teams at businesses spend weeks if not months completing a business plan for the year ahead, with the completion of said plan typically happening one if not two months into the new financial year.**

It would be printed, bound and distributed to all key stakeholders who would turn the pages of it together whilst all agreeing it was fantastically realistic and achievable only for it to then sit in the boot of their car until anyone dared speak of it again.

Several months later an inept leader would ask the dreaded question of “how far off plan are we?” which leads on to my other particular favourite, the “reforecast”, aka “its all got a bit tough so let’s reduce the base plan”, so we can have some positive outcome at the year end.

**Joking aside, the business plan MUST be more than an annual exercise you complete.**

You must avoid the temptations of distraction and ensure the business plan and associated financial performance is your bible for the period to which it relates. Everything must be benchmarked against it. If you aren’t doing this as a business leader your ability to grow will be severely impacted, and how can you expect anyone else to buy into your vision? First hold yourself accountable, and then the team.

## **ASK YOURSELF:**

- Are you up or down on plan – both revenue and profitability?
- How is the gross margin performing?
- Is your sales mix in line with plan and if not, what are you selling more or less of?
- Link the plan to new business and client mining? i.e. what products or services do you need to actively promote?
- Is it really a temporary timing difference or have you lost / gained in the period?
- How are your overheads tracking – particularly payroll?
- How is new business tracking?
- Do you truly believe the plan remains achievable?

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**“It’s not that there’s not enough time, the time needed was spent doing something else.” Frank Sonnenberg**

**“There aren’t enough hours in the day” is a myth, and frankly an excuse.**

Undoubtedly as you become more senior in your career and your home life evolves alongside a growing business your availability becomes increasingly limited.

At times you feel like you are fighting to keep your head above water, performing every element in life to a sub-standard level.

People will preach to you about “prioritisation” but in reality, you haven’t got time to write a pretty to-do list where you get the satisfaction of crossing off items completed. You are a hot headed, reactive mess acting like a dog with a wasp, constantly distracted without the time to start and finish anything.

As the growth continues you will never have felt time pressure like it. Leaving work dissatisfied with your progress only to return home to a young family in need of your attention when you are tired and distracted by what tomorrow holds doesn’t help ease the pains of guilt.

You find yourself wearing too many hats. You suddenly have a hand in the client services, new business, finance, HR, IT, as well as culture, talent retention, training and development...the list is endless.

Wearing all these hats and dedicating the time and effort each business function deserves is impossible. You cannot allow this to continue as it simply isn’t sustainable and will result in burnout.

**ASK YOURSELF:**

- Where are you focussing your time?
- Where should you be focussing your time?
- Who is in control of your time?
- Do you have a location where you know you can be more productive?
- Do you have access to live, timely and accurate information on the business performance?

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# **The best business leaders I have come to admire are all too aware of the critical role they play in continuing to help their businesses grow and evolve.**

**Something that works well for me is to block out and dedicate time each week to the business plan. Respect this time and be unapologetic about not moving it or deferring it. Communicate with your team so they understand the importance of this time and they too respect its importance.**

Set a realistic minimum number of hours per week where you exclusively work on progressing your business strategy. For many business owners dedicating any small percentage of time on a weekly basis will be a significant improvement from bouncing from board meeting to board meeting, firefighting, haemorrhaging time on HR issues and underperformers, with a complete disregard for the bigger picture.

After completing the management buy out of BDB I was told by several peers what I had to look forward to in my first 12 months as an owner of a growing business. Such items included interviewing candidates, 1:1s with team members, mediating to keep the peace and countless spreadsheets to guide the strategy. Whilst it is all too easy to allow this to become a reality, I didn't want to give them the satisfaction of being right.

I'm a big believer in being involved in the interview process. I do also hugely appreciate the input of my trusted team who are not only capable of assessing capability but also cultural fit. I still like to meet any candidate the team propose to hire, but not to double check, more to endorse their decision and show the candidate that I have a vested interest in their career and development at BDB.

Whilst we are on recruitment, a key learning for me over the years is to hire to fill skills gaps, not for personality or because the candidate is in your mould. A clone army will appeal to a certain type of client, but will limit your attractiveness to many other clients, prospects and candidates alike.

**Embrace diversity and aim to build a cohesive, complementary team who collectively can drive the business forward to new levels of success.**

Mediating to keep the peace in my opinion is a complete waste of your time as a business leader and I would instead argue you need to do better with recruiting talent who share your vision and embrace the culture you desire. I actively avoid this as otherwise your involvement becomes the norm, removes any point of escalation and counteracts the freedom and responsibility initiatives and culture I am so desperate to champion to the team.

In the early stages of any business, spreadsheets are inevitable. There comes a point in every business though when its time to grow up and embrace systems, tools and technologies to automate otherwise very manual processes and controls. Yes, such systems come with often considerable capital and operating expenditure but again keep your eye on the prize of arming yourself with live business information where you can be confident of the accuracy, and most importantly will allow you to put your now free time to better use to grow the business.

**“Focus is not a ‘business only’ thing. Each person has only twenty-four hours per day, and how we spend those hours shows what’s important in our lives. The question we must ask ourselves is... are we focussing on what really matters?”**

**Mac Anderson**

Black & White  
insight #2

**Focus ‘ON’ the business  
not ‘IN’ the business**

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**“You can delegate authority, but you cannot delegate responsibility.”**

## Byron Dorgan

**Most entrepreneurs, business owners or CEO's by their very nature are self-confessed control freaks.**

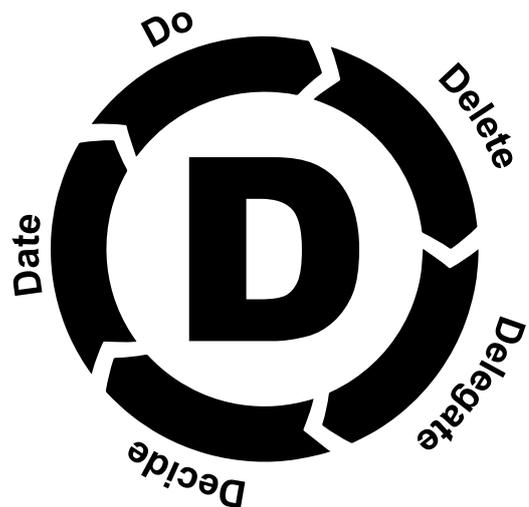
I feel daily I'm trying to drill into the team that in the long run the concept of "it's quicker if I do it myself" simply doesn't work. You might see some short-term gains in that you save time coaching and developing the next generation, but the long-term result is a team with poor experience and over-reliance on a few key individuals. I'd also be a hypocrite if I didn't confess to the fact that this continues to be one of my biggest areas for development.

I imagine most people reading this report have been on some form of time management training across their career. The classroom principles typically leave you feeling empowered and ready to tackle your to-do list.

**The classroom theoretical examples sadly fail to take account of the "Monday morning grenade".**

The unexpected event that knocks the wind completely out of your sails and starts the week off on a bad foot. The thing that means you probably won't even see your to-do list for the next 24 hours. Couple this with the same on Tuesday, Wednesday...and it becomes easy to understand how you end up with thousands of flagged items backing up in your inbox.

The one thing that did stick with me and has served me well over the years is the 5D's method (do it, delete it, delegate it, decide on it, date it). Instead of recklessly allowing your inbox to ping away at you with notifications that you instantly jump on and reply to, ask yourself five questions and act accordingly.



### ASK YOURSELF:

- Do you need to do it?
- Does it need to be done in the first place?
- Can / should someone else complete it?
- Can you take some time before issuing a conclusive response?
- Does it need to be done immediately?

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# “Great things in business are never done by one person. They’re done by a team of people.” **Steve Jobs**

**Increasing headcount and pressure on the demands of the Board often leads to the appointment of various sub-committees to drive forward business initiatives.**

I have encountered numerous leadership teams, steering committees, junior boards, leaders of tomorrow etc over the years at a variety of employers and clients. I genuinely struggle to recall a single occasion where the groups had tangible objectives with clear progress being made.

Instead countless ineffective hours were spent in internal meetings, with individuals promoting their personal agenda, jostling for recognition, and generally whinging about how they’ve not had enough time to move things forward due to the demands of the day job.

Typically, the meetings then still last the assigned length of time with the group spiralling into a negative mindset discussing how hard life is. This only fuels the fire of a political culture where more time is spent discussing problems and under performance than championing your stars and focussing on the intended tangible progress.

My advice would be think twice before creating sub committees unless you too are committed to ensuring they succeed. The right team and culture splinter groups to help drive forward new business initiatives can be a superb life line when things are manic. If you don’t have complete confidence in their ability to deliver, I’d recommend firstly dealing with the niggling doubts and individuals concerned.

- Set clear objectives from outset
- Set a realistic timeframe for delivery with regular milestones / check ins
- Be unwilling to move the timeline and tackle no progress updates head on
- Make people accountable – celebrate progress and don’t skirt
- Consider incentivising key contributors

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# **“Refuse to lower your standards to accommodate those who refuse to raise theirs”. Mithilesh Chudgar**

Everybody has their take on this common business problem. Only the other day a good friend (from a senior position in the financial services market) told me of the 85% rule. Apparently, you should be happy if the person you delegate a task to completes it 85% as well as you can. Or as my father in law tells me regularly to “accept nobody will do it as good as you can”.

I refuse to accept this as the status quo, and I guess come more from the Branson camp on this:

**“It’s all about finding and hiring people smarter than you. Getting them to join your business and giving them good work. Then getting out of their way. And trusting them. You must get out of their way, so YOU can focus on the bigger vision. That’s important.”**

Richard Branson

I clearly don’t expect a junior team member to perform a task as well as someone with much more experience. If, however, you don’t think they have the potential after investment in training, coaching and nurture to perform the role at least to the standard you did then you are accepting things will slip, compensatory measures will need to be made, and ultimately the pace of growth slowed further.

## **ASK YOURSELF:**

- Do you clearly articulate your expectations of the team?
- How good is good enough?
- Are you offering timely, constructive feedback to the team on how they can improve for next time?
- Are you correcting style over substance?
- Are you delegating to availability or capability?

Black & White  
insight #3

**Its all about finding and hiring people smarter than you.**

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# “If you are unwilling to take the risk to trust others, then others will be unwilling to take the risk to trust us.” **Simon Sinek**

**Just like in any relationship, trust is hard to gain and quick to lose. Many peers comment that their team or individuals in their team “can’t be trusted”.**

For many this seems to be an accepted norm with no steps being taken to either gain trust or to take positive action to remove untrustworthy individuals from the team structure. If you have a desire to grow you must learn to trust your team. If you are sat here reading this confident that you have individuals your team that can't be trusted, it's time to clear out the dead wood as these people will critically stifle your ability to grow. Equally importantly, you have a duty to those team members who do consistently step up and perform, so they are not forced to carry or compensate for underperformance.

Trust is more than a 5-letter word to be loosely banded about the workplace. For me, there are three critical elements or levels to building trust:

## **Competency**

- Clients, customers and team members are looking for someone whose level of competence inspires trust. A statement such as “Just trust me!” is totally inadequate in today's world. There is an obligation and a duty for you to provide explanations that are clear and concise.

## **Consistency, commitment & reliability**

- Are you a “person of your word” and hold yourself accountable in all actions within your business relationships. As the leader you set the standard and I'm a huge believer in controlling the tone at the top. This applies to you and any senior members of the business to lead by example.

## **Sincerity & integrity**

- You must ensure that your clients, customers and team believe that if they tell you something about themselves, their business or any sensitive information, you will handle it with the utmost respect and confidentiality.
- Are you transparent and open in your business relationships? A lack of transparency will make you much more vulnerable to damaging your business relationship.

If at any stage of a relationship one of these elements is neglected, trust will be lost. You need to earn the trust of your team just as much as you feel you deserve their trust for simply paying them a salary each month.

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insight #4

**Trust is earned,  
not a salary.**

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**Loss of control and visibility should frighten you as a business leader. It's a good fear, one that should never be too far from your mind to ensure you don't become complacent.**

All fears can be overcome and with a robust granular business plan, a commitment to avoid distraction, investment in the right people and technology you can continue to grow whilst ensuring your focus is on the business not in the business.

"If it was easy everybody would be doing it" remains one of my favourite quotes. Enjoy the grind and no matter what, don't quit or lose sight of why you started in the first place.

Good luck

**Matt**

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