Why Business Owners Should Mix Strategy with Hands-On Involvement



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Conventional wisdom says to work on the business, not in the business. That sounds like good advice, but is there more to it? Michael Gerber's book "The E-Myth Revisited: Why Most Small Businesses Don't Work and What to Do About It" discusses how business owners make this common mistake and how to avoid it.

For those who need a little refresher, working in the business is about doing tasks. That includes the things a business owner might do day-to-day, such as hiring, making a product or actually delivering a service.

Small business owners often wear lots of hats, so they might

be doing all those things and more. Working on the business means being strategic, envisioning the big picture, implementing systems, or scaling and growing the company. No doubt, this is important work for the long-term sustainability of the operation.

It is very common for business owners to work crazy hours. Many will tell you that it is necessary, but they also enjoy the work.

Gallop found that 39% of the business owners worked over 60 hours a week. A study from OnDeck found that "just 57% of small business owners take vacations." Given these statistics, it is easy to see why so many articles offer to help entrepreneurs break bad habits, free themselves from the drudgery of the work and delegate more to employees.

In short, work on the business. I would argue that it is easy to tell business owners that they need to change the way they operate, and some business owners become quite enamored with the idea that they don't need, nor should they do certain types of work. After all, why should an owner work to create a sales proposal? Or deal with a customer emergency? Aren't there "people" to do that?

Probably, but is there a healthy balance between working in and in the business? That balance will vary based on the operation, but I believe that business owners and managers should intentionally step back into the business from time to time. Working in the business can have huge benefits.

Consider the popular reality show *Undercover Boss,* which debuted in 2010 on CBS. Companies such as 7-Eleven, Waste Management and others were featured, and opinions of the show varied dramatically. Some say it was "too good to be true." Others thought it was heartwarming and real. One thing it did show, and I have seen it firsthand, is the issues that bubble up when you are spending too much time in the "boardroom" and

not in the business.

Here are three important benefits of stepping back into the business.

1. Improved communication

Communication may be one of the most important duties of a leader. A business works best when owners communicate regularly, clearly and concisely. But it is just as important to take the time to listen. Think water cooler conversations along with more in-depth interactions. When business owners are not available and accessible, it is easy to miss red flags. It is easy to assume that work is getting done, products and services are being manufactured to meet needs, or that customers are happy.

In the early years of my business, I had a period when I was traveling a great deal and admittedly did not spend as much time communicating with staff. As a result, I did not realize that an employee was actually bullying other employees while I was away. It was only when there was an incident with a contractor that it came to my attention. I fired the employee, but it taught me a great lesson about the value of being accessible and making time to connect and communicate. When you spend time in the operation you can see how people interact. Ask questions and build relationships with people at all levels of the operation. People need to hear from leaders and have the opportunity to be heard. Being present keeps the communication flowing, builds trust and helps avoid miscommunication.

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2. Greater visibility

It is easy to get wrapped up in working on the business and spend hours in your office thinking and planning. I believe owners need to get out and be visible- “walk the floor.” When you show up, you are setting an example and showing the importance of their work. Attend a meeting and just say hello. Put on PPE and visit the plant floor. It is amazing how safety becomes more important when the owner is visible. That increased visibility is good for employee morale and engagement. And that is good for business because it shows that you are holding people accountable.

Stepping back into the business also means greater visibility with customers. In my case, I take the time to go on video shoots and reconnect with clients. Sure, I have people whose job it is to do that work, but it gives me a chance to reconnect. At a time when lots of interaction is virtual, it makes a huge impression when you make the effort to be face-to-face. What you learn is truly valuable when you do sit down to work on the business.

3. Hands-on learning

Business is always changing, and what worked in the past may not be what takes the business forward. That’s why so many have embraced the idea of life-long learning. I will go one step further and say there is no better way to learn than to step back into the business, get your hands dirty, and actually do the work. Learn a new software program. Or build a product. Of course, that is not always possible, but you can work alongside employees to understand their challenges and the resources they need. When a business owner takes the time to learn new things hands-on, it encourages everyone to learn and grow. The result is a business that can compete with the very best.

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The bottom line is that for business owners, getting too far away from business is problematic. Not spending enough time on strategy is dangerous. Balance is the best approach.

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