Proper Care and Feeding of the Business Owner

By Caroline Jordan, MBA

That sizzling sound you're hearing may be a symptom of a major hidden cause of businesses closing their doors. It's called burnout. And you may be its next victim. Often the last thing a business owner considers is his or her health and sanity. The burnout that results from overwork and stress can deliver a death blow to the very enterprise you've been giving your all to create. Setting a course for your business that includes the proper care and feeding of the business owner is a critical success factor in every business.

Burnout occurs after prolonged periods of stress and physical and/or mental fatigue. It leaves business owners feeling hopeless, powerless, cynical, and resentful. It creates an atmosphere of failure, stagnation and reduced productivity. Burnout carries throughout your business showing up in your relationships with your clients and employees and ultimately impacts your bottom line and the growth pattern of your business.

Typically, burnout occurs in situations where you feel:

- overworked
- like no one understands what you're going through
- confused about priorities and direction
- resentful about tasks that you don't feel rewarded for performing
- concerned about financial survival and security
- you have more on your plate than you feel you can handle.

In short, self employment and burnout go together like salt and pepper, peanut butter and jelly, and Donald Trump and real estate. The result is often a very unhappy, unfulfilled business owner who finally decides to throw in the towel and get a nice simple 40 hour a week job.

Recognizing that burnout is a serious threat to the survival of your business is a critical step in preventing or bouncing back from burnout. Burnout steals your passion, the very passion that caused you to start your business. Without that passion, your ability and willingness to do whatever it takes to make your business a success quickly diminishes. You find yourself resenting your customers instead of wanting to help them. You dislike your employees because of their constant demands. You snap at your spouse when asked how your day went. And you constantly feel pressured and unable to relax.

Understand that you have two roles in your business. You need to play both the role of employer and the role of employee. If you worked for an employer who expected you to work non-stop, never allowing time off, paying you far less than you're worth with no benefits, you'd soon have your resume updated and be out the door. And yet, that is the daily reality for many small business owners.

Remember, you are your employer. Are you creating a work environment of tyranny and maltreatment? Treat your help like you would want to be treated—incorporate benefits like flex time, comp time, and regular time off. Review a list of job duties to see if it's a fair and logical distribution of work. You need to take care of the talent just as you would if you had actual employees. Your business depends on your health and sanity.

Preventing burnout is a critical piece of your business plan. How will you keep yourself fresh and engaged with your business? What do you need to do to keep yourself from becoming overwhelmed? What tasks are overwhelming you? Develop a plan to outsource those tasks or find easier ways to do them. What adjustments do you need to make in your business so you can take regular time off?

Often business owners insist they can't take time off and can't afford to hire help. Regardless of where your business is today, as the owner of the business you have the power to chart the course of your business. If you feel you can't step away as things stand right now, begin to plan a direction for your business that will allow you to do so in the future.

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