

What's **Wrong**

In Small Business?

Seven Unusual Steps to Help Your Business Thrive in the Storms of the Marketplace

by **Mark Silver**

How A Boy Hated Business

I grew up in small business. I watched my parents work seven days a week, and when they weren't working, they talked about "the store."

Don't get me wrong. They loved, and still love, the retail wine store that my grandfather owned since the 1930's. I worked there myself on many occasions—in the stockroom or on the cash register when I was old enough, on the parking lot when I wasn't.

My mom had the additional habit of starting small businesses on the side: a phone book and a consignment shop. I followed their example by delivering the Washington Post for two years, and then starting the most profitable Junior Achievement chapter for hundreds of miles, beating out the nearest challenger by hundreds of times.

My parents have made good money, and I did, too, from those early adventures. Yet I was unable to make the connection be-

tween what they were doing and why they were doing it. I grew to hate business, and what I saw to be the greed and antagonism it created, and dreaded the cost to my own heart.

A long trek through social justice activism, the non-profit world, publishing, emergency services, and my own spiritual journey has led me a circuitous route back to business.

You don't need to spend years on your own trek. There are some simple insights and actions that you can take to bring business into alignment with your heart, and still make a profit.

What's Wrong In Small Business?

After working with hundreds of clients, I was delighted to discover that the non-profit world and the small business world shared a motivation: a true desire to make a genuine contribution in the world. As I spent more time with small businesses, I saw evidence of love and caring every-

where I turned.

Examples? A two-time cancer survivor real estate agent whose mission was to help people get into their homes, now, and not delay their dreams. A mortgage broker who specialized in helping people with bad credit get into, or save their homes. A therapist who started a company to help people from different backgrounds interact through games to build a sense of community that transcends differences.

I have hundreds more, and so do you, no doubt. Not all of the missions are grandiose. But the sometimes the simplest missions have the deepest personal impact, such as a gardener who started a store that just wants to help people bring more beauty into their lives.

Business only for profits is being discarded in recognition of this deeper sense of service that has always existed. The January, 2004 issue of FastCompany magazine had an article on their top 20 “Social Capitalists.” In their words: “We have measured organizations’ actual innovations and their impact. We have gauged their aspirations and their sustainability.” In other words, having a mission and a profit is not only viable, it’s finally being seen in the mainstream that this is why most of us get up in the morning.

But what happens to most small or micro-businesses? Your average business owner has jumped in with both feet- no other job in the wings, no huge cushion of savings, no golden parachute. Then the reality of being business begins to set in, with shocking rapidity. The competing needs of marketing, product/service delivery, customer/client service, business systems, money/accounting, work environment, and professional relationships leaves the business owner feeling like a

juggler gone mad.

The larger picture of making a difference gets lost in this overwhelming whirl of details and the pressure of trying to keep food on the table and the doors open. Even for experienced, successful business people, “business as usual,” can feel draining and depleting.

The end result is that people feel dispirited, exhausted, burnt-out, and their sense of confidence, passion, or direction is lost. Because of this, a painful percentage (the Small Business Administration reports xxx%) fail every year, leaving a trail of debt, failed dreams, and broken hearts.

The even sadder part is that it’s not just the business owner who loses out. The vast majority of income, jobs, and business innovation come from small businesses. When a small business fails to thrive, our neighborhoods, our communities, and our cities suffer, too. Everyone is affected by these failures.

What can we do to turn the tide?

The Usual Answer Doesn't Work

Most people naturally enough identify the problem as a lack of know-how or performance. Know more! Do it better! And it’s true, there are certain skills to be learned, and resolving inefficiencies in how you work can help you, sometimes to a great extent.

However, there is a danger in this kind of thinking. When you find yourself reading business books by the dozen, taking all kinds of workshops and seminars on everything from marketing to time management, or paralyzed from the overwhelm hoping it will get better, you might begin to suspect that more isn’t necessarily better.

Business isn’t rocket science. Yes, you do

need to know things. If you've never done marketing or selling successfully, there is plenty to learn about it. If you're unfamiliar with accounting needs in business, you do need to know.

However, you have probably come to this same conclusion, and are still feeling stuck.

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Perhaps you've learned more, and done more, but still feel like you're in pretty much the same place. Or maybe you feel so overwhelmed that it's hard to even think about learning or doing more.

Increasing performance is not all it's cracked up to be. Steve Berglas, writing in the June, 2002 *Harvard Business Review*, in an article titled "The Very Real Dangers of Executive Coaching," addresses at length the trend in business to hire coaches to increase performance. He warns that "when... problems stem from undetected or ignored psychological difficulties, coaching can actually make a bad situation worse. In my view, the solution most often lies in addressing unconscious conflict when the symptoms... are stubborn or severe."

Although Berglas was talking specifically about corporate executives, you don't have to be in a corporate environment, or have serious psychological problems, for this to apply.

Most of my clients come to me depleted. Exhausted. Burnt-out. They have lost their passion, their direction. And they come wanting help getting more done, or knowing more

about business, so that everything can finally be okay- they can make a profit and get to doing what they want to do.

Although they know their symptoms very well, what is the root problem? Yes, they do need more information, and yes, they do need to perform more efficiently. But with 1000

self-help books on how-to and better performance, why aren't they getting it? Why aren't *you* getting it?

The main problem is what I call "a depletion of the heart." When I was a

paramedic, the 9am Monday morning heart attack was no joke. We are facing our work and our businesses dangerously depleted, and thinking that we can just learn or perform our way out of the hole has serious side-effects.

The results of this type of thinking? Off the top of my head I can think of dozens of people who have come to me having quit or are seriously considering quitting their jobs or their businesses because, in the words of one client, "I just couldn't do it anymore." Many of the rest of them haven't yet considered quitting, but, are afraid to stop moving because, as one told me, "If I stop, I'm afraid I'll never get up again."

When you have nothing left to give, how generous can you be? If you came into business to make a difference, but are so depleted that your primary concern has become "to look out for number one," then the larger sense of mission, and with it your profits, goes out the window. Not because we're inherently greedy. Not because business is, at it's core, a corrupt way to live. But because the way we've learned how to do business has deeply exhausted us.

Do you feel excited, energized, full, gener-

ous in your work? Or do you feel exhausted, burnt-out? And do you really think that more, better, faster is going to get you where you want to go?

An Unusually Effective Answer

Rob Lehman, from a February 1998 talk *Love & Money: Our Common Work* which was reprinted in the 25th Anniversary Issue of the Noetic Sciences Review, said “That the effect of money depends on the nature of the relationship between the giver and the receiver, and that every time we exchange money it is a manifestation of the quality of our relationships.”

He goes on to say “Without this understanding, I am persuaded that no matter how innovative our programs, no matter how much money is spent with the best of intentions, if (to paraphrase Thomas Merton) the relationship through which the money is passed does not exist in wholeness and freedom, we will not have exchanged anything but our own ego-centered ambitions, fears, and illusions.”

I've found that by putting the focus on our relationships in business, and on our relationship to our business itself, everything else starts to fall into place. And the first relationship that needs tending is the one with our own heart. Rather than trying to fill ourselves by doing more, if we first remedy our depletion, then we can easily take care of anything we need to do.

When you feel nourished and cared-for, the challenges recede and often seem to just melt away. You can learn what you need to learn, and the energy and spirit is available to follow through and succeed in a much bigger way than you anticipated.

If It's So Easy, Why Am I Still Stuck?

The truth is, people become depleted when they are forced to face parts of their business, or their lives, with which they are uncomfortable or by which they feel overwhelmed. You might feel comfortable with parts of your business, but rarely do you feel comfortable with all that needs to be done.

This discomfort or depletion causes feelings of frustration, fear, anger, or sadness, and it seems easier to avoid the whole situation than to face it. Unfortunately, ignoring the situation, and with it the associated part of the business, causes the whole business to struggle, and perhaps to fail.

When do you know to drink water? When you notice, and acknowledge that you are thirsty. When do you know to rest? When you notice, and acknowledge that you are tired.

Similarly, your depleted heart can't get what it needs until you acknowledge and face the uncomfortable parts of your business. And yet, for most of us, facing frustration, anger, sadness, or fear, the symptoms of spiritual depletion, is much more difficult than facing hunger or thirst.

I had a client come to me recently who was in a struggle with her employers over, well, nearly everything. This was compounded by the fact that her employers were her family- it was a family business. She felt there was a way to get what she needed in her sales position, and preserve her family relationships, but she couldn't see it.

The truth was, she was exhausted, and yet she couldn't let herself rest. She first had to face her fears of disappointing others, of letting herself down, of all the ways that she believed she had to perform before she could

experience true rest.

Once she had faced the perceptions that were causing the fears, she was able to get true rest. And then, once she was rested, she saw with clarity what her next steps were. She saw that she didn't need to "push," and that events could unfold at a pace that seemed slower than before, but actually happened much more quickly because she wasn't getting in the way.

The key for her, and for all of us, is to have the courage to face the most scared, most angry, most sad, parts of ourselves. These parts are also our most sensitive parts, that contribute to our intuitive sense of knowingness when something is wrong or right, and that help us to navigate successfully through complicated situations.

The Seven Steps to Freedom

How do we walk through these challenging places? There are seven essential steps, which many of you may recognize from different spiritual or religious traditions. They are universal, because they are common to our human experience.

The First Step: Stop any action.

The actions you have been taking haven't been working- they've just been exhausting you. So first just stop trying to fix, solve, or get anywhere.

The Second Step: Assess where you are.

We spend so much time trying to be in a different situation, that we haven't really spent time looking at where we are.

What is the situation you are facing. What is really going on? And how do you feel about it? When you identify how you

feel about it, is the emotion reactive or core? A reactive emotion is not wanting to be in the situation. My client was angry because her work situation wasn't different than it was (reactive), but she was sad because it was so painful (core). Identify your reactive and core emotions to the situation, and then focus on the core emotion.

The Third Step: What do you need?

If the situation were different as you imagine you would like it to be, what would that do for you? In effect, you are asking what is it that you really need. This need is going to be an essential quality of life, such as peace, happiness, contentment, safety, trust, etc. If you are identifying something more concrete in your life, ask yourself how you would hope to feel if you had what was more concrete.

For example, perhaps you want more clients in your business. Your attempt to get more clients would get you more... money. You identify money as a deeper need. But when you sit with money, you realize that having enough money actually represents security, or freedom, or peacefulness. It is this essential quality that you are really searching for.

The Fourth Step: What does that get you?

Take a look at your strategies to get that essential quality. How is it working for you? What are those strategies really getting you? Exhaustion? Nervousness? Take a look and see if the strategies you've been employing have been working to get you what you really need.

If not, let them go for the moment. Perhaps you need to look at a different strat-

egy?

The Fifth Step: Find a Full Well

Okay, here is the heart of how it all works. You've assessed your situation, identified what you are really needing, realized that your strategies to get that aren't working. Now we start to find what works.

The first thing I like to point out is that your exhaustion, worry, etc, these are just symptoms of your heart being thirsty. When you are thirsty, your throat feels dry, and you feel thirst. Do you judge yourself for being thirsty?

Recognize these symptoms for what they are: thirst for this essential quality, and you've just been drinking from an empty well and getting a mouth full of sand.

Most of us recognize that more things in our life don't really provide fulfillment, happiness, contentment, or true safety, security, or love. This is primarily an internal search in deepening our connection in our heart.

Take some time for internal reflection, meditation, prayer, remembrance, to help fill that emptiness inside. For a detailed explanation of a simple spiritual practice that helps here, get our free workbook *Getting to the Core of Your Business*.

The Sixth Step: Get What You Really Need

Drink until you are full.

The Seventh Step: Action

Once full, what do you naturally want to do next?

the workbook *Getting to the Core of Your Business, How to Make a Healthy Profit Without Losing Your Heart™*, online <http://www.heartofbusiness.com>

Mark Silver, the founder of Heart of Business™, is a successful business consultant and healer, who brings an active connection to the Divine to his work.

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