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Are you the bottleneck in your business?

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Smart owners are always on the lookout for factors that limit their business' growth and productivity. Sometimes, however, a significant bottleneck can be found staring back at you in the mirror.

Let's start by seeing how much your business depends on you: Management consultant

- If you took a month off from your business and turned off your phone, would you have a business to come back to?
- Are you working 60 hours a week or more with no business growth?
- Are you doing tasks that could be done by others?
- Is most of your time spent fighting fires?

Say yes to one or more of these? They're classic warning signs that your business is too dependent on you, and the flipside of owner dependency is that you become a bottleneck in the business.

Up to about \$1 million in sales, contractors can get by on their trade skills, intelligence, and raw energy. Most stuff can be managed in your head and you can keep an eye on everything. Truth is, in the early days you probably had no choice but to do it all yourself.

The glass ceiling: beyond \$1 million or so, the world changes and the stakes get higher. Estimates, scheduling and cashflow become more complex. There are more people to hire and keep track of, more materials to order, more projects to manage. Not only is the volume of work increasing, the complexity is growing as well.

If you're handling all the operational and financial decisions yourself, it only makes sense that more business will mean more of your time until eventually there aren't any more hours in your life. That's where the business stalls.

To move through this invisible barrier, the owner must transform himself from expert tradesman to capable business manager. Management and leadership, however, require a completely different set of skills that most contractors didn't pick up along the way. Business managers need to be skilled

at things like strategic thinking and planning, delegation, monitoring and control, process development, being a role model, human resource techniques, communication, and financial management. Just as you didn't pick up your trade expertise by chance, you won't develop good management skills without similar effort and practice.

The good news is that these skills are no more difficult or complicated than those you already have

— they're just different. We teach contractors this stuff every day.

The first step: create a clear and compelling vision.

Don't roll your eyes at this. The simple fact is that you truly can't get anywhere unless you know where you're going. Without a plan you'll do the same things over and over and remain stuck in the same place forever.

Your vision-creation process needn't be complicated or time-consuming, but it does mean doing some serious thinking about what you want from your business and the life it provides you. Get away, write it all down, and come back to it a few times. It doesn't need to be Shakespeare, just clear enough for you to use as a destination.

Build your team. With your goal now in mind, map out the organizational chart that will be needed to achieve your goals, specifying which jobs/boxes are responsible for what results, and figuring out who should be plugged into each of the boxes (you'll find that your name is written in many of them now).

If the right people aren't around, carefully hire and train new employees to fill the gaps. There'll probably still be people doing multiple jobs, and that's okay for now.

Delegate. With capable employees in place, create some breathing room in your schedule by off-loading tasks to your employees.

Before you tell me that you've tried delegating and it doesn't work, please understand there's a specific way to delegate tasks so that you get consistent, reliable, excellent results through your people. Do it otherwise, and you end up taking the work back. On our Website is a simple action plan that will get you started (www.contractorsbusinessschool.com).

Also, if delegation feels like you're losing control and your role as leader, don't worry. Done properly, the delegation process actually increases control and augments an owner's role by allowing him to tackle bigger ideas and projects than he could as the continual firefighter.

Now you can begin to make the transition to becoming a skilled ownermanager. You now have a long-range plan, a solid team of employees, and you've created time in your schedule by delegating your busy work to others. Now you can begin to focus on transforming yourself into a skilled business manager. You can take classes, read books or use a business coach/ consultant. The important thing is to stick with it, get the managerial skills and put them into practice.

There will become a time to move on from the the be-all and end-all of the firm. Being the bottleneck in your business doesn't mean you've been doing it wrong. You've just followed a natural path like thousands before you. At this point, however, recognizing that you're a limiting factor is a helpful sign that it's time to adjust your role in the business. Aside from freeing your business from the limits you've been causing, creating an owner-independent business will give you the life you probably had in mind when you went out on your own in the first place.

(And yes, many of our clients really do take a month off and let their businesses run themselves. They didn't believe it at first either!).

Jayme Dill Broudy is the founder and principal of Contractor's Business School, a coaching, training and consulting firm specializing in helping contractors produce more profit in less time. Since 1993, Broudy has worked with hundreds of contractors in many specialty areas to build successful, stand-alone businesses. To get the free CD, "10 Key Strategies to Build a Business that Works," go

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