Leverage Your Systems

Let’s face it. You likely started your business by being a risk-taker, doing things when they needed to get done (even if they weren’t perfect) and not necessarily following any rules or documented path. It was a highly intuitive process because there was simply too much to do at the time and you did what you could to fix problems and get to the solution as quickly as possible.

Because of this, if we’re being honest, sometimes your business looks like it is being held together by toothpicks and Band-Aids; disparate pieces thrown together without rhyme or reason. And that worked for a long time. After all, it was just you in the beginning and that’s about as much as you could manage without falling apart. Your go-to command was probably, “All hands on deck! I’ll do what I can to stop the chaos, but then, I need to move on to important things.”

The problem is, the exponential growth of a business doesn’t happen when it’s built upon a house of cards being held together with very little glue.

To scale your business (and income) to its next level, and for you to get your life back and have things run smoothly with or without you, this must now change. You can no longer afford to run your business by the seat of your pants. You must now leverage systems for everything, absolutely everything.
1. Although it feels counterintuitive, systems liberate you and give you the freedom you seek

You’ve resisted predictability and structure, but now it’s time to embrace these like never before. The mindset of an overwhelmed business owner is often tied to this idea of being a rugged individualist who doesn’t have to answer to anyone and does what he or she wants. You pride yourself on being an individual who can do things on your own, who can make it up as you go. You’ve shied away from too many rules and restrictions in your life because they typically feel suffocating to you. Besides, you don’t think in terms of processes as much as you like to create shortcuts, change direction when needed, be flexible and find ways around problems on your own.

The issue is that all of this requires an enormous amount of energy and lots of time, neither of which you have enough of in your current stage of business. You are likely exhausted. This is the biggest reason you are not growing. The longer you keep operating this way, the more complexity and chaos you will add to the business, delaying growth and any feeling of freedom.

You can’t be in the weeds and planting the garden at the same time. As your business heads into its next growth phase, you will need to begin embracing the idea of having systems, something you have likely resisted. Having structure and a set of processes will give you your time back, drastically reduce or eliminate headaches, liberate you and increase your revenues and profits, while giving you the freedom and predictable growth you seek.
With the right systems in place and everyone following them (including you), you are no longer needed to put out fires. Imagine what would happen if everything in your business was predictable, in a good way. Imagine that you are no longer required to handle the details of your business; imagine that things consistently get done on time, on budget and within a certain set of desired specifications. How would that feel? How would that make a difference in your life?

You see, when everything is documented and systematized, and your processes are consistently improved, your role in the business shifts dramatically. Issues either 1) don’t come up, 2) take care of themselves or 3) get handled by a team member, which means you have more time to be strategic about the big picture and time off to enjoy your life again.

When things no longer fall through the cracks, chaos is removed, the day-to-day operations of the business no longer require you and you can begin shifting your role in the company from a reactive stance to a proactive leadership role.

This requires a shift in self-image from being the person who delivers the work and drives every aspect of the business to a self-image rooted in being the passive investor with a reduced daily involvement in the business, happily collecting a check.

2. Your mindset must now embrace you as leader of a process-driven company
A person-assembled business is impossible to scale. When I first hired team members, I picked personalities I liked or created positions around people I knew. I would ask, “What are you good at? What can you do? OK, cool, I like you. You’re hired!” and then scrambled to find something for them to do in my business, based on who they were, not necessarily what I needed most at that time.

Without realizing it, I was creating a team based on the people immediately under my nose, rather than the roles I desperately needed to fill to move my business forward. I’ve encountered this countless times in the 6-figure businesses I’ve mentored. They assemble a hodge-podge of people, hoping it will all work out and that the people will stay. Problem is, personalities are not always predictable. People change, people leave and there is too much room for human error.

Consistency comes from stability, regularity, dependability, reliability and uniformity, which are ultimately what scales a business. These exist in a business that runs on systems, processes and operations. Consistency is the opposite of how most businesses start out. Consistency positions your business to run like a well-oiled cash machine that doesn’t require you to be there day-in and day-out, or it positions your business to be sold for millions down the line.

A process-driven business can be scaled and successfully replicated again and again. This can be seen ubiquitously in franchise restaurants that are able to produce the same product in one part of the globe as in another across the world because they are process-run.
It doesn’t matter if the two locations have totally different owners (franchisees) who speak different languages, have different cultures and personalities. The product is predictably similar because the business is process-driven rather than people-driven.

The same can be true about your business. Going forward, you must shift your view of your business from a personality-driven business (yours or your team’s) to a scalable business model that is focused on processes, systems and operations, rather than on a set of people who cannot be duplicated exactly. It’s miraculous what happens when you’re willing to do that.

Consistency can be achieved when every function within your business is documented and producing predictable, verifiable results. Anything done more than once a year in your business needs a system around it, ideally documented in an Operations Manual with checklists that describe several processes: “How we do things around here.” This can include the HR Process, the Sales and Marketing Process, the Customer Service Process, etc. When every process is documented, it is no longer swimming in your head (or another key employee’s head) and can be continually updated, added to and used for training new employees in a shorter period of time than you would ever be able to without it.

For many business owners, an Operations Manual is not urgent and is more of a “nice to have” because it isn’t seen as directly and immediately bringing in more money for the business. This is one of the reasons it often gets pushed to the back burner and stays there collecting dust. That being said, the minute the Operations
Manual takes form, is put into place and is followed by all, revenues typically go up, the owner’s total number of work hours go down, productivity increases, issues are reduced, clients and customers are happier, referrals go up and profit is increased. This always results in more money and better cash flow.

The key to running your business from an operations perspective can be revealed through a simple exercise:

Imagine that, in one year’s time, you were to be given an opportunity to go on sabbatical for a year to do something you’ve always wanted to do, something that requires that you remove yourself from your business entirely for one year, with the simple caveat that your business must keep going strong, without you.

The question to ask yourself is the following:

For the business to run successfully without me, or even to be duplicated without me being there, what would need to be in place to produce similar, if not better, results?

3. You are not the one to create or run the Operations Manual

Yes, everything needs to be documented, but you don’t have to be the one to do it — you just need to create the shell of it. When a business owner on the verge of leveraging their business hears that it’s time to document every single process in their business, down to each excruciatingly small detail, the look of dread usually
overcomes their face. The thought of doing something that goes against the grain is daunting, even revolting for many. Worse, there’s not enough time to work on money-generating activities, let alone something like the Operations Manual that doesn’t initially bring in new cash.

A shift in mindset is required here:

Your job is to help to define the processes that must be outlined, as well as a deadline by which this must be completed, but it’s then every team member’s job to document each procedure as they do it each time. Perhaps they’ll grumble at first, as this seems to them to be an unnecessary process since it lives conveniently and comfortably in their heads.

To overcome this, share the vision of what your company will look like when everything is process-driven, how everything will run more smoothly and efficiently for each team member. Instead of you, the business owner, putting a pause on driving sales, each member of your team will write their section of the Operations Manual, focusing on big picture (process) and then small details (checklists and how-to).

Communicate to each team member the advantages of them having a well-documented Operations Manual. This can include benefits such as reduced work hours, more predictable results, fewer things falling through the cracks, a sense of pride and fulfillment or possibly even more time off. Listing out the benefits they will personally receive is usually enough to get them excited to work on it, especially if
it’s a company-wide effort and there is a common deadline by which this must be completed, perhaps even followed by a celebration or team reward.

Your systems must be run by people who are not entrepreneurial. Making sure that T’s are crossed and I’s are dotted after a system has been created is usually not the business owner’s forte. Often, the person who created the system is also not the one who is wired to run it for years to come.

There are indeed people, such as Project Managers, who love to work on a big project and give their all to that project, until its completion. These are also usually the same people who are excited to move on to another project and aren’t interested in revisiting project A or running it.

This is where a welcomed addition to the team is someone wired as a Process Manager or Operations Manager, someone who gets great satisfaction from taking a process and making sure it keeps being updated and followed by all. This process-driven person will likely not be the business owner, at least not for the long term, but someone who is happy leading, managing and holding team members accountable, and keeping projects going.

The ideal Process Manager or Operations Manager is someone who likes to be exact, create a plan, design sequential systems, honor deadlines, categorize and organize things that are similar, and who prefers to have closure and order. At the same time, they like to create undeviating standards, protect the status quo, create precedents and reduce unexpected events.
This is usually not how you, the business owner, operate, as you typically like to improvise. Having someone on your team who can specify, systematize and stabilize will provide the balance needed to map out (and run) the systems that allow your business to grow further and scale to new heights.

**4. With the right systems, you can be high-touch in a high-tech world**

Even emotion can be generated systematically. Making clients feel special is an important part of keeping them and generating referrals, which is an important way to leverage your business. A gift here, a handwritten note there or a special touch that wasn’t expected can all further the relationship with a client or customer and have a very positive long-term impact. The problem is that most business owners who do these high-touch gestures are initiating them personally. This is fine in the beginning when a business owner has 10-20 clients, but it’s not scalable when we’re looking to leverage the business and have 100-200 clients or 1,000 to 2,000 or more ongoing customers. The feel-good actions (and resulting positive emotions the clients feel) should absolutely continue, but they too can be put into a predictable, well thought out process, such as automated birthday cards, that replaces the business owner’s manual role. The issue is that many entrepreneurs worry that, once they stop manually initiating high-touch, feel-good actions in their business, they will lose the relationship with the clients or things will feel “cold.” This is not necessarily the case. If left to you and only you, perhaps you wouldn’t make that nice gesture for every client, every time, simply because there are other more pressing things looming. But with a system in place, making the client feel special
can become a predictable, repeatable process that never falls through the cracks, which is infinitely better than nothing at all.

This can show up as a welcome gift that is automatically generated each time a new client signs up (we send our Boldheart Business members a box of delicious brownies and a smiley-face sticker on a welcome kit that says, “Please do not open this box until you’ve called this 1-800 number and have listened to my welcome greeting”) or a birthday card and gift that is sent every year, one week before the customer’s birthday.

Feeling good can be a systematic, orchestrated process that clients love, even if they’re unclear as to whether it’s part of a system or not. Despite the fact that they know you’ve sent them an automated card or a box of brownies in the mail upon signing with you, they are still impressed by the gesture (and respect the system) because of the loving intention behind it and the fact that no other company they deal with is likely doing as much for them as your company is. These kinds of systems can produce raving fans and, once established, don’t require any extra time or involvement from the business owner.

5. Have systems in place to continually improve your systems

Problems and mistakes are great for moving your company forward. Having systems and processes in place for each and every aspect of your business doesn’t mean there will no longer be issues or problems that arise. There will be and you can count on that. But whereby a problem or issue could bring your business to a
standstill in the past, when everything is documented and running like a well oiled machine, a new issue will only point to a part of a system that needs tweaking, and it can be handled quickly and efficiently with a “systems improvement process.”

When an issue arises or a project fails, it can actually be a blessing if you shift your mindset from “failure” to “opportunity for lasting improvement.” This is your cue to look at the “mistake” as a fault in a current system, trace it back to its origin, take the lesson you learned from it and create another system around it to better it, for good. Here’s how you do it: examine any situation, event or occurrence that originally seemed like a failure in your business and allow yourself time to process it from a strategic viewpoint.

If you’ve ever seen the 1993 comedy *Groundhog Day* with Bill Murray and Andie McDowell, you know that Murray plays Phil Connors, an arrogant Pittsburgh TV weatherman who, during an assignment covering the annual Groundhog Day event in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, finds himself waking up to the same day again and again.

Each “day” plays out exactly as the previous one, but only Phil is aware of this time loop. At first he is confused, but when the phenomenon continues on subsequent days, he decides to take advantage of the lack of long-term consequences and, for the lack of a better word, abuses his privileges. Eventually though, Phil uses the time loop to his own benefit, not only to improve himself, but to gain the attention of his love interest. He begins to use his by-now vast knowledge of the day’s unfolding
of events to help as many people around town as possible and subsequently woo McDowell’s character. And it works.

Despite great initial frustration and self-sabotage, Phil embraces the situation, figures out what works about it and what doesn’t, and when given the opportunity to experience February 2nd all over again, he eventually applies all his hard-earned lessons, creating new systems along the way. He uses his past experience to better his future experiences and create predictable outcomes. This is what you want in your company...predictable outcomes.

Within my own company and with our business owners at Boldheart Business, we’ve named this process the Groundhog Day exercise. We use it to learn from each experience (positive or negative, internal or client-facing) so that we can improve our processes and create new systems. This translates to creating “problem free zones” that we can enjoy for years to come.

Embrace the issues that arise in your business like the irritant that causes a pearl to be formed in an oyster. Pearls are formed inside the shell of an oyster as a defense mechanism against an irritant that enters its shell. The oyster deposits layers of calcium carbonate around the irritant to create a pearl. It is the irritant that initiates the creation of a beautiful pearl.

Without the irritant or problem, the pearl would not have been generated. In the same way, an issue in your business can be just the thing to trigger a system that forever enhances your business. With every system you add to your business, you
make your company even more valuable, effectively allowing you to remove
yourself from the day-to-day operations of the business and gain your life back.