



Overcoming the ‘Leader Wall’

Watching the Olympics, I’m reminded of the fact I should go out and do more exercise. At the moment I resemble the couch potato character ‘Denis’ played by Simon Pegg, in the movie ‘Run Fatboy Run’. In the movie Denis attempts to prove to the girl he jilted at the altar, that he can transform into somebody worthy of her attention again, by running in the London marathon.

There is a great scene in which, after many exhausting miles shuffling along the dark streets of London, Denis suddenly hits a brick wall. In his delirious state Denis can’t quite understand what the wall is. The wall symbolises the marathon runner’s wall or ‘the bonk’. It’s a stage when the glycogen stores in the liver and muscles are depleted and the runner literally runs out of energy. To continue the runner must rely on other types of physical and mental processes to continue because the mind and body unanimously want to quit.

I think this is a great metaphor for entrepreneurs who get to a certain stage in their business life cycle and suddenly find the going becoming very frustrating. I call it hitting ‘*the leader wall*’.

If you imagine that building a sustainably successful business is a bit like running a marathon. At first the entrepreneur achieves success through the sheer force of will. They use motivation to push through the challenges. At this stage, if you put a mountain in front of the entrepreneur, they would climb it and carry their small team on their backs, such is their drive and tenacity.

Once a certain measure of success has been attained, systems are introduced to make future success programmable. Everything is happy days for both the entrepreneur and the growing list of clients. To accommodate greater success, the team usually expands as well. Adding more people to the mix is when the entrepreneur hits *the leader wall*. It is usually around the 10 to 12 people mark.

At this stage the entrepreneur has been enjoying hitting big targets and holidays in the sun to reward themselves for all their hard work. However; there is dissatisfaction and tension simmering within the team.

Other challenges and symptoms arise at this stage:

Leverage: The entrepreneur finds it hard to leverage the full potential of the team. The entrepreneur feels like they're on a treadmill having to run faster and faster to stand still.

Execution: Ideas and vital tasks are not executed as nobody wants to take ownership. As the ball gets dropped more often, customer satisfaction levels begin to decline.

Attraction: Attracting top talent becomes difficult as word gets out that the workplace is a stressful environment with little of the appropriate rewards or culture in place to satisfy a peak performing team member.

Delegation: The entrepreneur not being able to trust the growing team, begins to find it hard to delegate confidently. The entrepreneur becomes the bottle neck to company growth and stifles the development of new leaders.

Engagement: The team find themselves less engaged with the work as it all becomes a bit soulless and more like working on a treadmill.

Resistance: Entrepreneurs find themselves under extreme pressure which makes them become resistant to transforming. The ego is only scared of two things, not getting what it wants then when it's achieved some success, it becomes scared of losing it again. Entrepreneurs often resist taking a sideways step to learn new skills for fear of losing everything. They revert to old, hard wired habits and push harder which become a vicious cycle of self-defeating behaviours.

At this point the entrepreneur has to evolve to become an inspirational leader. This means using a different kind of energy to engage and influence stakeholders. In the entrepreneurial stage of business, direct motivation is used to push through challenges. But now the entrepreneur has to inspire the team to want to climb the mountain for themselves.

The business is now a system and when you push against a system it pushes back. Inspirational leaders have to implement the *law of indirect effort* to get things done. That usually means that as the business grows, the entrepreneur and team have to learn their way into a different paradigm.

This journey from entrepreneur to becoming an inspirational leader is about power and who has it. Just as a parent gives birth to a child, the child is dependent on the parent for survival. The parent has the power to influence the child directly. But as the child grows, it takes on a life of its own. It needs the parent to ensure the child has the appropriate skills, confidence and personal power to mature into an effective, confident and fulfilled adult.

The parent and child must individuate from each other to become separate entities, if both are to reach their full potential. Like the effective parent, the inspirational leader helps the team become self-sufficient. The leader slowly transfers the power to the system, which enables the team to work effectively and feel more fulfilled whilst the leader becomes free to take on greater challenges.

An important question for entrepreneurial leader to ask is:

“Who's got the power in this situation?”

If the power to complete a goal is reliant on the leader being directly involved, then there is more work needed to transfer power to the team. This transference of power becomes easier when the DNA profile of the organisation is clear.



Like the iceberg, all the real power of any system is usually hidden beneath the water line. Ask the Captain of the Titanic! What appears on the surface is not what drives the day to day decisions and behaviours.

Most entrepreneurs see an opportunity in the environment and work to exploit it. But once the business develops into a system, it then becomes incumbent on the leader and team to develop their identity, modus operandi, direction and purpose.

Developing something bigger than themselves, shifts the business into becoming a purpose focussed enterprise as oppose to being purely activity driven. It builds esprit d'corp within the team. People buy-in to the business instead of just buying off the business which attracts loyalty.

To develop a peak performance business, it helps if the leader values prosperity above profits. Material success and team satisfaction are not mutually exclusive. For this to work the team should have an input into developing the organisation's DNA profile. In doing so the team becomes interdependent and the leader becomes independent by learning to let go and trust in the team and scan the horizon for new opportunities.

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