

SUBTITLE

The Small Shifts That Lead To Big Results

Tara McMullin

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INTRODUCTION

I started running in early 2017 to establish a fresh morning routine, spend time in moving meditation, and improve my physical fitness. Like many people new to running, I started with the Couch to 5k training program.

In this plan, you complete workouts with varying intervals of running and walking. With each workout, the intervals of running increase in length and the intervals of walking decrease in length. It wasn't too bad at first. I've always enjoyed walking so I'd suffer through the huffing and puffing of the run intervals, savoring the walks.

Around the fifth week, you hit an interval that everyone seems to dread: 8 minutes. Running for 8 minutes hurt. I felt like my lungs and legs were on fire. I attempted to complete the workout several times but, ultimately, I got discouraged.

I pivoted. I started using a personal training app called Aaptiv. Aaptiv workouts didn't just tell me when to run, jog, or walk, the app's trainers talked me through the whole session. They reminded me to breathe,

coaching me to speed up or slow down, and checking in on my form. This coaching made all the difference in the world.

You see, when I started running, I assumed I knew how to run. I assumed that, if I ran more and pushed through the pain, eventually I would start to feel more comfortable on my daily runs. After all, I'd been an athlete in school. I ran up and down the basketball court. I ran from base to base. I'd spent plenty of time running.

But I started to notice that the form cues the Aaptiv trainers shared seemed a bit unfamiliar. They talked about over-striding, landing under your hips, mid-foot striking, and keeping your arms by your hips. I tried to incorporate the different techniques but it all seemed so strange. Still, I worked at it little by little.

By September of that year, I signed up for my first 5k race. I didn't feel prepared but I was assured that it didn't matter. If I couldn't run the whole time or if I went really slowly, there would be lots of folks in the race doing the same thing.

I finished in about 45 minutes. Considering I was dragging my then-9-year-old daughter along with me the whole way, I felt pretty good. I knew I could have gone a bit faster but I'd have the opportunity to try again soon enough.

Two weeks later, I ran my second 5k race. This race started on an uphill and, when we took off through the

starting line, something felt different about the way I was running. As I ran uphill, I noticed that I was hitting a different part of my foot against the pavement. Even when the road flattened out, I maintained this new form.

It had clicked: this was the mid-foot strike that all the Aaptiv trainers talked about during my workouts.

THE STAGGERING RESULTS OF SMALL CHANGES

As I approached the finish line, the clock came into view. The 29th minute was ticking up, second by second. I put on speed and sprinted to the end and finished in just over 30 minutes. I was shocked.

I knew I was going to beat my previous time but in no way believed I could run 3 10-minute miles. I attributed the success to my form locking into place.

I've continued running, continually hitting new personal records as I refine my form. I've even medaled in my age bracket a few times! Not only that, running does feel more comfortable. Races are always hard and new distances are challenging—but they're supposed to be. My daily workouts are fun and rewarding. I no longer run because I'm making myself. I am running because I love it.

Improving my form helped me to bust past a plateau in my training. Minor tweaks to my arm, foot, and hip positioning helped me shave minutes off my times

and added immeasurable amounts of enjoyment to my fitness practice.

These subtle changes allowed me to go from barely running a mile to comfortably running 8 miles—from struggling to hit a 10-minute mile to aiming for my first 8-minute mile.

To hit my goals, I have plenty of training ahead of me. But without those subtle changes, I wouldn't be where I am now—light years from where I started.

WHEN SMALL CHANGES MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

I started running by doing something *very* different from what I had done before: I started my day by lacing up my sneakers and hitting the pavement. This is how businesses get started, too. New business owners make a monumental decision to announce to the world that they have something valuable to offer.

Some do it quietly, others with a flourish. Some do it with intention, others almost by accident. They're trained professionals with a solid career who take a chance on doing a little something extra on the side. They're tired moms who realize they have valuable skills. They're overeducated, underpaid retail workers who put in extra work to train in a new industry. They're folks setting out on their own.

The most successful among them will make offers, learn from the deals that go well, make improvements,

and repeat. They'll focus on getting the right product or service in the hands of the right people. They'll set goals and surpass them.

This isn't a book about that stage of business.

As a former business coach and now the founder of CoCommercial, a platform connecting mid-stage small business owners, I've learned that the best thing you can do in this initial stage of business is just to *do it*. Take action, see what happens, and improve.

This is a book about what happens next.

At some point, these small business owners hit a ceiling. I've seen it happen over and over again. The ceiling often occurs right when owners are starting to feel confident, secure, and capable. Maybe they take a few more risks and maybe they set some bigger goals.

Despite feeling confident and doing the work they've always done, their new goals start to feel out of reach. Sometimes, there's a panic. Other times, there's just low-grade anxiety. They're afraid that they're stuck and don't know how to get moving again.

WHEN BIG CHANGES KEEP YOU STUCK

Their natural instinct is to reach for big tools like developing a new product, launching a rebrand, or investing tons of money in advertising. But, these big tools often just make things worse.

I've noticed this pattern over and over again in my decade of watching small business owners cycle through the ups and downs of entrepreneurship. I've even experienced this pattern for myself. I am obsessed with how people handle these periods in their businesses and the changes that ultimately allow them to bust through the ceilings they bump up against.

What I've noticed is that the people who succeed and thrive after the frustration of a plateau are the people who make a much more subtle change. Sure, some start a new business or develop a new product. But they do so with a fresh mindset and a new approach to how that business works. Most learn a new way to make their old businesses work—simpler, more thoughtful, less bound up in their own hustle and grind.

We don't celebrate these subtle changes in the way that we celebrate a revenue milestone. We don't announce them to the world the way we do a new PR. We might even be the only people who realize such a profound—if subtle—change has occurred.

This small book is a celebration of those subtle changes. It's an opportunity to recognize the necessary personal growth that comes along with leading your business into new territory.

Over the last three years, I've spoken with over 160 small business owners at different points in this story. I've observed hundreds more in programs, workshops,

and community spaces. This book is the product of that time spent scrutinizing and studying what separates those who thrive from those who stagnate.

In the following chapters, you'll find the subtle mindset shifts that have produced big results for many of the small business owners I've talked to. You'll also find questions for considering your current mindset and prompts for recalibrating it.

Fair warning: while these changes might be subtle and even small, they can be foundation-shaking. Once a new perspective sinks in, you might find yourself questioning everything you've done in your business to this point. I know I have. So remember that, as you read, everything you've done to get to this point is important. It's what has *gotten* you here.

Now, it's time to discover what will get you *there*.

A NOTE ABOUT PRONOUNS

In the past, when I've written about business, I almost exclusively wrote in 2nd person. The implication is that I had discovered or learned something and that I needed to teach it to *you*. Or, I had advice to offer *you* so you could meet *your* goals.

However, a not-so-subtle shift has occurred in my own thinking over the last 2 years. I am much less interested in proving to you that I have all the answers. I am, instead, much more interested in sharing my own experience and observations on this journey.

This book contains both. You'll find my observations and analysis. You'll find my personal experiences outside of the business arena and you'll find my personal experiences as a growth-minded small business owner.

As I wrote the book, I found myself acknowledging both the work that I'd put into understanding these mindset shifts and the work I was *still doing* to make these shifts myself. To that end, I've used 1st person plural pronouns throughout the book (although not exclusively).

While I'm not trying to create an artificial sense of intimacy with you, dear reader, I am acknowledging my own continued need for work in these areas.

That, I believe, is a lesson in and of itself when it comes to mindset shifts. While the changes I describe here may be subtle on the surface, the work of making the changes is deep.

THE CEILING

Many small business owners start out chasing what once seemed impossible: the 6-figure salary. That mark might have felt pretty far off in a corporate job where your salary bumps up a measly 2% per year, if you're lucky. But, now that you're a business owner, those proposals and sales projections add up much more quickly. Making 6-figures doesn't seem so impossible.

Whether you're a coach, a financial professional, a trainer, a consultant, or a marketer, the path to that milestone is pretty straight forward. You need to book 10 clients at \$850/month, sell 100 seats in a \$1000 program, close 4 \$25,000 consulting deals — or whatever math works for your business.

So you create your plan to hit that number and, with some trial and error, you hit it. Your little business is generating \$100,000 or more per year and you get to keep most of it. You set your sights higher—maybe you aim for \$150,000 or \$200,000. Unless you were a lawyer, hedge fund manager, or actuary in your previous corporate life, these numbers probably seem

pretty extraordinary. You're thrilled with your growth and you're proud of the money you're making.

But then it happens: your business starts to plateau.

Often, this happens around the \$250,000 annual revenue mark. This is the point where most businesses start becoming a little more than the owner or the owner and her assistant can handle. Either the owner starts hiring more help or balls get dropped.

At this point, revenue also stops adding up quickly. The things you could always count on to make bank—a new product, a referral campaign, a marketing sprint, a price increase—don't seem to get the same returns they used to.

You've hit The Ceiling.

GETTING FRUSTRATED

While the exact numbers might vary, this is the point at which the business owner's goals for growth start to outpace their newfound skills and operational prowess.

The Ceiling is incredibly frustrating because it feels like you should just be able to do more of the same to get more results. It feels frustrating because your results are already so good that you're hesitant to push for more or risk making change. It's also frustrating because, often, you can spot The Ceiling before it even happens. You can see that your capacity for growth

and the business's capacity to handle more customers or clients is starting to taper off.

At this point, you're doing almost everything right: you're starting to hire some help, you're planning in advance, you're having the necessary sales conversations, you're documenting processes. And yet, busting through that Ceiling feels elusive.

You look at the numbers and, all of a sudden, you're out of room to grow. The confidence you've only just discovered starts to wane. The Ceiling starts to feel like it's caving in on you.

The reason the Ceiling becomes such a formidable opponent is that it's caused by many of the things that allowed you to get to this point in the first place. Your passion for your craft, your attention to detail, your obsession with delivering a great product to people you really care about—these are all exceptional and necessary parts of the beginning of any business.

They absolutely have a place in a bigger business, too. Otherwise, you would just stop reading and find a way to be happy with the business you have.

In a bigger business, though, owners start to shift the focus of their passion, obsession, and attention to detail just slightly. They start to become obsessed with the process. They're equally passionate about their customers and team members as they are about their craft.

This shift in focus is subtle but it permeates every layer of the business. As it happens, you start to see marketing, product development, customer service, management, operations... all with a new set of eyes.

You'll notice how, as I address the mindset changes business owners make to break through The Ceiling, they each start to reposition passion, details, and obsession—along with reprogramming assumptions and beliefs you might have about how you run your business. But never fear, dear reader! We'll give them a new home and you'll have a new relationship to them. To me, this has been one of the most exciting parts of putting this puzzle together.

THE WAY YOU SEE THINGS

The rest of this book addresses mindset shifts. But what is a mindset? Your mindset is the pattern of expectations and beliefs you have about, in this case, your business. Every action you take and every decision you make is filtered through your mindset.

Your expectations and beliefs can keep your business stuck at The Ceiling—even when it feels like you're doing everything right. Your mindset can reinforce assumptions and prevent you from seeing opportunities to innovate. Your mindset can produce big waves in what is otherwise calm seas.

Busting through your business's Ceiling might require some bigger changes—like breaking into a new market or adjusting your business model—but you won't be

able to effectively make bigger changes until you make the more subtle changes to your mindset.

YOUR TURN:

Get specific: where have you noticed growth stall out in your business? Where are you still experiencing growth?

What needs to change logistically or operationally in order for your business to continue to grow?

How have the business decisions you've made to this point contributed to your current success? How are they holding you back from further success?

FROM IN IT TO OWNING IT

THE IN IT MINDSET

Your business is based on your personal ability to create value and deliver results.

THE OWNING IT MINDSET

Your business is a system that creates value and delivers results independently of your work, time, and energy.

The vast majority of small businesses start accidentally—or, at the least, without a grander vision guiding their direction.

Instead of considering what the business will grow into as it matures, business owners often consider who *they* will grow into the longer they're in business. You end up equating business growth to a career path. You can envision yourself taking steps up the proverbial ladder but don't have a vision for how your business will change to support that climb.

You can see your smart-looking home office. You imagine the high-powered clients you'll serve. You can hear yourself on the phone calls that pay your bills. Aside from more expensive office supplies and higher paying clients, not much changes between where you are now and where you envision ending up. The work itself looks largely the same.

Yet, growing a business is not the same as promoting yourself to the corner office. It's one thing to believe that your career with a company that's not your own will incrementally ladder up to slightly better pay and more interesting responsibilities. It's another to assume that your business will follow the same trajectory.

PERSONAL IDENTITY CAN INTERRUPT PROGRESS

Business owners hold tightly to their original identities. Coaches, marketers, consultants, bookkeepers, educators, designers, artists—those labels feel comfortable and familiar. And, after all, aren't you in the business of being a coach, a consultant, a bookkeeper, or a designer?

The truth is that you're *not* in the business of *being* a coach, consultant, bookkeeper, or designer. You're in the business of coaching, consulting, bookkeeping, or designing. It might be a subtle distinction on the surface but it means that your identity, first and foremost, is business owner. This shift in identity sets

the stage for every other subtle change we'll discuss in this book. You're stuck without it.

The reason—and forgive me if this sounds obvious—is that a coach coaches, a consultant consults, a bookkeeper keeps the books, and a designer designs. These labels reinforce the idea that your greatest value to your business is as the person doing the work that your business sells. They put your focus on maximizing your limited capacity as a professional instead of finding ways to grow the capacity of your business.

Business owners are not professionals. They might have professional skills. They might have had careers in a professional field and employ professionals. But their role in their companies—no matter how small—is to make intentional decisions on behalf of the business. They craft a vision, not only for themselves, but for the business as a whole.

Despite how much you try, when you identify first as the person who does the work and creates the value, you can't effectively make those kinds of decisions. You'll always be thinking of yourself first and the business second. Your identity as the coach, consultant, bookkeeper, or designer robs you of the ability to see the steps that need to come next in helping you break through your ceiling because this identity ties you to the operations of the business in an unhelpful way.

The first subtle change is realizing that things aren't going to look the way you pictured them. Your assumptions about the work you'd be doing and the way you'd be spending your time were off. You're *not* crafting a career. You're building a business.

CHANGING YOUR ROLE IN YOUR BUSINESS

Alison Pidgeon, the founder of Move Forward Counseling in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, told me about how this transition went down in her business. After completing her masters in counseling psychology, she started her therapy practice, spending her time in session with clients. She soon realized that, if she wanted to grow her practice, she was going to need to pay closer attention to the business.

She said, "I came to the conclusion that I don't have the time and the space to think about these big picture things—where is the practice going—because I'm seeing clients."

Alison now focuses on how her *business* creates value, as opposed to how she creates value. Her business creates value by building and nurturing the space for counseling to happen in. Alison's new role is continuing to expand this space so that more people can take advantage of counseling and therapy services at Move Forward.

It's important to realize that this shift isn't about cleaning up your personal calendar or raising your rates so that fewer people book time with you. It's not

about delegating the production of your products to someone else. It's not about hiring an admin so that you have to do less of the emailing, scheduling, or customer support.

These actions might very well be part of the process of making this change in identity. But doing them on their own—without prioritizing your identity as a business owner—won't be enough to allow you to break through your Ceiling. You'll find yourself caught in similar traps, facing similar obstacles instead of moving forward. You'll succumb to an unproductive attachment to your business instead of being able to detach from it.

You'll never be in a position to lead your business.

As soon as I started to identify this subtle change as an inflection point for thriving business owners, I started asking everyone I talked to about their experiences. The stories are all remarkably similar to Alison's. They all boil down to transitioning from a role where you are doing the work to the role of owning the business.

This doesn't mean that everyone who has experienced this subtle change has stopped doing work they love—plenty of people still coach, consult, write, design, or educate. But it does mean that they see their chief role as owning the business and making decisions accordingly. Without this transition, you continue to make plans, set goals, and perform pivots that put you right back on the path to the Ceiling.

Instead of breaking through the Ceiling, your decisions and actions force you to run into it constantly. You control the revenue of the business with your time, talents, and reputation. In order to break through the Ceiling, you have to purposefully reposition yourself.

You might have tried to grow your business beyond yourself in the past but your attachment to your old role has stymied you. You've still been plugging yourself into every value-creating activity. You still use access to you as a means for justifying higher price tags. Your team still thinks of you as the linchpin of the business because you do, too.

When you've transitioned to owning the business—really internalized it—you'll see new opportunities and make different decisions. You will choose a different path. You'll have a new role to learn and new responsibilities. It'll be scary at first and you'll almost certainly backpedal from time to time. Your job, as the owner, is to keep making decisions, regardless of how tempting it is to dive back into the work of the business.

The rest of the subtle shifts depend on this. Without it, the others are impossible to make.

YOUR TURN:

What value does your business create that doesn't require your input or attention?

In what ways is your business still dependent on you?

How would your day to day activities change if your role changed from "in it" to "owning it?"

What assumptions have you made about where you're necessary in your business?

FROM SPECIAL SNOWFLAKE TO SPECIAL SAUCE

THE SPECIAL SNOWFLAKE MINDSET

Only you can do what you do.
Customers buy to get a piece of you.

THE SPECIAL SAUCE MINDSET

You've created a process or system that generates results.
Customers buy in order to reap the rewards of that process.

As soon as you choose to enter the world of self-employment, you're bound to hear some variation on the mantra: "Only you can do what you do."

That mantra is designed to assure you that you have something unique to offer the world at a time when you might be feeling ill equipped, vulnerable, or generally nervous about your prospects as a business

owner. Unfortunately, it's a mantra that makes people feel good for a bit but ultimately guides them down a path that makes doing business much harder.

In February 2018, the International Coach Federation estimated that there were approximately 53,000 life coaches in the United States. If even just the top 5% of those coaches are exceptionally effective, that still means that those coaches are competing with 2,649 others who are equally effective.

What about for web designers? Management consultants? Therapists? Even artists, illustrators, and photographers? While it's true that there's enough business for everyone, it isn't true that you are somehow uniquely qualified for success.

There is no participation trophy for putting up a website and calling it a business. You are not a special snowflake. Plenty of people are doing what you do and helping clients or customers get incredible results.

They can fulfill the same value proposition and deliver the same results. They have similar strengths and talents. Until you come to terms with that, you'll be constantly at odds with the fact that you're just one of thousands delivering the same kind of product or service.

What's worse, when you're focused on taking advantage of your special snowflake status, you make decisions that force you deeper and deeper *into* your business instead of allowing you to step outside it and

act as an owner. Thinking you're a special snowflake only keeps you deeply entrenched in your business, ignorant of market reality, and stymied in your capacity for growth.

With the subtle shift from being in it to owning it comes the deep knowledge that you are not your business, making it clear that considering yourself a special snowflake does nothing for the growth potential of your business. You begin to see that your personal set of values, strengths, and systems only matter if they're operationalized into the business. That realization leads to our second subtle change.

But, I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's take a closer look at how the "special snowflake" concept wreaks havoc in a small business.

WHY YOU SHOULDN'T BE THAT IMPORTANT TO YOUR BUSINESS

Up until you reach the Ceiling, the value proposition for your business is likely centered on you. You might offer access to your time or special attention. Maybe you offer personal management or design of your clients' projects. Maybe you take pride in the fact that you touch every product that ships.

You assume that your time and energy is the cost of doing business. That it's spent in Q&A calls, coaching sessions, project design or oversight, or some other aspect of you that is actively baked into your offer.

In order to create value, you have to be involved. You probably even measure value by its relation to you and your energy. Certainly, you can scale this to a point with digital products, small group programs, or careful team support but at some point the Ceiling is waiting for you.

This is the plight of a special snowflake business. No matter how much you create leverage, as long as the value of what you're creating is predicated on "only you can do what you do," you'll continue to bump up against the Ceiling.

Let's make a subtle shift from special snowflake to special sauce.

COKE'S SECRET FORMULA

Coca Cola's special sauce is a secret only a few select employees know because recipes cannot be protected by US intellectual property law. If it becomes known publicly, there's nothing to stop another company—or a few—from reproducing Coke and selling it far and wide. The formula was created by John Pemberton in the late 19th century. It was purchased by Asa Candler in 1891 and he founded the Coca Cola company as we know it today.

John Pemberton created the secret sauce. Asa Candler saw the value of the secret sauce and created the first settlements of a beverage empire. In 1919, Ernest Woodruff and a group of investors purchased the secret sauce yet again and took over the company.

Somewhere in your business is your very own Coca Cola recipe. It's a process, a framework, a style, or a recipe that is at once all your own and insanely valuable without you. Your secret sauce is something you created the initial formulation for but that others can reproduce and even improve on.

Being a special snowflake feels good. It's personally validating. It allows you to take a certain level of credit when your client succeeds or your customer gets incredible results. Making the decision to no longer think of yourself as a special snowflake means shaking off a core piece of your identity.

Discovering the special sauce you've already created, though, is liberating. It means there's a method to the madness—that there's something that can be refined and made better. It doesn't depend on whether you got a full 8 hours of sleep, or the stars aligning, or on magic.

IT'S NOT MAGIC EITHER

Now, I know that many consider their powers of coaching, analysis, design, or creation to be a form of magic. It seems ephemeral despite the fact that it works again and again.

Arthur C. Clarke, a futurist, science fiction author, television host—all-around super cool nerd—wrote, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." If you were able to

show the internet to someone from 1920, they'd think it was magic. If you showed someone from 1940 how to order an Uber ride, they'd think it was magic. Heck, I had an Amazon Prime Now package delivered to me in 2016 in less than 12 minutes and it was honestly magical.

What seems magical about all of this is just technology that you don't yet understand. It's not technology the way we often think of it: code, hardware, high-tech inventions. It's technology in the broader sense: the skills, processes, and methods. These allow you to create a product or deliver a service that achieves a particular result.

As part of the subtle shift from special snowflake to special sauce, your job is to devote yourself to understanding and improving on this technology—not continuing to believe you are casting spells.

Early in her career, singer-songwriter Cathy Heller worked hard and got a record deal from Interscope Records and then another from Atlantic Records—neither worked out. After a string of odd jobs and a bout of practicality, Cathy felt like she was living someone else's life. Things weren't working and she wasn't happy.

She says she thought at the time, “There's got to be a way for me to do music. There's just got to be another way. I had enough talent to get noticed by these people—so something was good. But it wasn't the

whole enchilada. Still, I knew there was something there.”

A few weeks after deciding she wanted to find another way to do music for a living, she picked up an issue of Billboard magazine. In it, there was an article about indie musicians who were licensing their songs for movies, TV, and commercials. Like most people, she'd taken this area of the industry for granted. She'd never considered how that music got there and whether the artists behind it were getting paid.

She decided to do some research. She started watching ads and writing down what she noticed about the music in them. She says, “I noticed that all these songs for ads were really uplifting. They wanted you to believe that, if you went to Lowe's for paint, it was going to be the best day ever.” She noticed slightly different patterns in the songs for movies and television.

She started to see these patterns as the stories and emotions that movies, TV shows, and ads were trying to convey. Then, she saw the patterns as problems she could solve. She realized she could go into the recording studio and create music that filled the need for advertising executives and movie producers.

It worked. Catch The Moon Music was born, specializing in licensing music to everything from Hollywood movies to New York City advertising agencies. Cathy's music started to appear in ads for major companies like Walmart and, yes, Coca Cola.

Her music was featured in countless TV shows and movies. But Cathy's success didn't stop there.

Cathy realized that, while she was a talented singer and songwriter, others could do what she was doing. And, if she could help those songwriters get placements, her business could grow. She realized that she could train others in the skill and problem-solving framework she'd developed so that the talent pool could increase exponentially.

Cathy doesn't think of herself as a special snowflake. No doubt she is confident and self-assured. I'm sure she realizes that her story is unique. But Cathy built her business around a special sauce—not her talent as a songwriter. She developed and trained others on how to create her special sauce, too.

HOW TO USE YOUR SPECIAL SAUCE

What makes your special sauce valuable isn't you. What makes it valuable is that it works. It solves a problem. It creates a result. It's dependable and reproducible. Cathy took the magic of songwriting and turned it into a process that she—or any other songwriter—could follow to create results.

If you haven't discovered your personal brand of special sauce yet, it's time to start paying close attention. There are things you do on a daily basis with your clients or customers, with the products you create, that aren't a stroke of genius but instead a carefully engineered procedure that you're not aware

you're following. Your job now is to start documenting that process.

If you *have* discovered your special sauce and you don't know what to do with it, it's time to find someone to share it with. It might be your first employee, an apprentice, or a workshop full of students. The "who" doesn't matter so much as that you start communicating it to someone else. As you train and communicate your process, you'll refine and improve it. Plus, your trainee will likely notice things about it that you haven't—and that's a good thing.

After you've discovered, documented, and refined your special sauce, it's time to examine your business model and the vision for your company. Your special sauce is now your main asset. It will change your capacity for serving customers, hiring team members, and selling products so make sure that's reflected in your plans.

If you find that this process feels uncomfortable, don't panic. You've built your business on how valuable others perceive you to be. Wrestling that value away from your self-worth and putting it on something as mundane as a procedure or process will shake you. With time, lots of personal reprogramming, and plenty of fresh brand messaging, you will see the other side.

And, your business will thank you for it.

YOUR TURN:

In what ways do you base the value of what you do on who you are? Why?

What do you currently do that feels like magic? What's the underlying technology?

Who do you know who could do what you do with the proper training and process?

FROM ATTACHMENT TO ANALYSIS

THE ATTACHMENT MINDSET

Your personal worth is tied to the results you can provide for others—and how they feel about you.

THE ANALYSIS MINDSET

You intentionally address shortcomings in your process when they arise and get curious when things don't go as planned.

I've personally made a drastic lifestyle shift in the last 2 years. Hey, not all changes can be subtle.

Not only did I start running, as I mentioned earlier, but I started hiking, climbing, and lifting weights, too. I have fallen in love with working out and my morning fitness routine is now an integral part of my day.

In fact, I love my workouts so much that I'm prone to overtraining and pushing myself too hard.

One of the first times this happened was during a holiday vacation. Without a demanding work schedule to limit my running time, I thought it would be the perfect opportunity to dramatically increase mileage and try for some new milestones.

The first few runs of that vacation filled me with confidence. The chilly air reset my end-of-year spirits and I relished each new accomplishment.

Then, I set out on a 4-mile run during a visit to my mom's tiny town. Around the first mile mark, my right ankle started to bother me. I pushed on. In another half mile, the pain was becoming sharper. By mile 2, I was limping and had to call it quits.

After that workout, I couldn't run again for 6 weeks.

I had become so hooked that I didn't notice I was overtraining. Most training plans suggest increasing mileage by 10% per week (or adding an extra half-mile or mile for beginners). I had attempted to double mine that week!

I'm still hooked on running—and climbing, and hiking, and lifting weights—but I've moved my focus away from the high of an individual workout toward following a training plan to achieve my bigger goals. Success doesn't come from crushing my workout day

in and day out. Success comes from working the process and trusting my plan.

It can still be hard to take a day off but I'm learning to enjoy easier workouts that add up to bigger results over the long haul. Plus, I've been able to avoid more overtraining injuries, all while still demolishing my goals and experimenting with harder training cycles.

I've noticed that thriving business owners make a similar shift in focus as their businesses mature. In the early stages, owners obsess on client or customer results. They get attached to individual projects and their outcomes.

In fact, they can get so attached to achieving outcomes that they run themselves and their businesses into the ground. Business owners who are too attached to outcomes are quick to assume that they are the problem, that the process is broken, or that the product isn't perfect enough. The result is that they end up over-delivering time and time again.

THE RESULTS OF OVER-DELIVERING

Over-delivering ends up clogging up the owner's capacity to bring in new business or even reconsider how their business model works. It puts an unnecessary burden on a system that can and does work on its own. Regularly going out of scope, reworking a product, or throwing resources at making a client like you means that you're diverting attention

and energy away from activities that could help you push past the Ceiling.

Thriving business owners, on the other hand, stay passionate about getting results but they focus their energy on working the process. They prioritize outcomes and take care with individual projects but don't get attached to them.

They find that the more they hone the process, the less they need to worry about results. They can feel confident that, if the process is followed, the results will come. This all but eliminates the urge to overdeliver.

GET THEM TO WORK THE PROCESS

Consider Sarah Von Bargen. She's a prolific blogger and the creator of Bank Boost, a course on taking control of your money. Sarah wasn't satisfied with the results her students were getting and had a hunch that she could do better.

Sarah could have decided to rework the course from the ground up or throw in a bunch of additional resources to beef up what customers were learning. But she believed that her students would get incredible results if they actually followed the process. So the question wasn't about doing more with a broken system. It was: how does she get her students to follow the established process?

She told me, "I believe in the work that I do, I believe in my course, and I know that if they did the course, it would be life-changing. But if I can make some tweaks on my end, and help them get to the place that they want to go, why wouldn't I?"

Sarah decided to experiment with running the course live. It would have a start date and an end date, weekly emails, a Facebook group for peer support, and a few group Q&A calls. She was careful to balance what would be helpful with not wanting the course to consume her life. The goal was simply to discover what would happen if more people worked the process.

When Sarah collected feedback after the initial live run of the program, she was shocked to discover that there had been a 2300% increase in the amount of money saved or earned by her students over the do-it-yourself version. Not only that, but her students were itching to give the program testimonials, share it with their friends, and rave about it to those considering the purchase. She'd not only changed people's lives, she'd created a marketing machine.

Instead of reinventing her product and over-delivering on bonuses, Sarah was able to trust her own process. She made the smallest of adjustments and achieved a huge return on investment. All it took was some careful analysis.

That's what this subtle change is all about. It's the shift from an attachment on the results, the reviews, or, yes,

wanting people to like you, to a focus on an analysis of the process.

Over-delivering isn't the only problem with getting attached to the wrong things.

DON'T DO IT FOR THE LIKES

Srinivas Rao is the author of *An Audience Of One* and the host of The Unmistakable Creative podcast. He explained to me that our attachment to “likes”—both the social kind and the social *media* kind—can cause us to jeopardize the integrity of our own work.

He advocates for nurturing a creative practice that serves you and upholds your own expectations. He told me, “We put so much emphasis on product and so much less on process and, yet, we don't have any control over how people will respond to what we do.”

In other words, we can't control results—no matter how attached to them we might be—but we can control our approach and execution of the process.

For instance, he told me he only chooses guests for his show based on whether he's curious about their story and whether he believes the conversation will be incredibly interesting to him. He trusts that interviewing a guest he is personally intrigued by will create a great episode that will help to grow the show. He never invites a guest on the show hoping they'll bring a bevy of new listeners with them.

Srinivas has learned to trust his process because he created that process through careful analysis and observation—not through an unhealthy attachment to new followers, shares, or viral success.

Just like the shift from special snowflake to special sauce, shifting from attachment to analysis helps you put your focus on something you can control, replicate, and scale. Both of these shifts allow you to approach projects or products with objective detachment. You can see problems for what they are—a signal to make an adjustment to the process or how its executed—not a personal attack or deficiency.

SET THEM UP FOR SUCCESS FROM THE GET GO

Jackie Powell, a photographer, used the pain she felt when her images didn't meet her clients' expectations to create a process that made sessions a joy for both her and her clients. She told me, “I had clients show up with no outfits to wear, with wet hair, makeup that didn't work with their skin (or my camera) or no makeup. I was leaving all of those decisions to the client with just a few bullet points of guidance from me. Then, when they didn't love their images I was heartbroken and felt like a failure—back under the desk with a box of Kleenex.”

Eventually, she made a shift. Instead of feeling like she wasn't good enough or frustrated at her clients for not getting it, she started to ask herself—and her clients—why the results weren't as good as they should be. She

said, “When I’d hear, ‘I look heavy’ or ‘my hair doesn’t look right’ or ‘these pictures make me look old’ or ‘my dress is wrinkled,’ I started to realize these were not really knocks on my photography skills or their looks —because to me they are all beautiful. Cue head smack. These were issues that I could easily fix with a few good processes.”

Jackie now has a robust process that begins well before a photo shoot. She spends time talking about expectations and desired results, as well as coaching clients on what to wear and providing hair and makeup before the shoot. The process is intentionally designed to eliminate the variables that caused problems early on. Jackie has increased the number of images purchased after every shoot by 1000% and increased her average dollars per sale by 625%. Those kinds of results speak for themselves.

If you find yourself attached to results that are out of your control, the first step is to determine what your own personal and reasonable set of expectations are. Sarah was looking for a marked improvement in students completing her program. Srinivas just wants to have fascinating conversations. Jackie wanted her clients to purchase more images. What is your true benchmark for success?

Once you know what it is, then you can analyze your existing process, the work you’re already doing, the work that gets forgotten, and the opportunities you see. Whether you realize it or not, the process already exists. Then you can ask yourself whether that process

is designed to create a result within your control (your benchmark for success) or whether it’s a stab in the dark to create a result completely out of your control.

Consider why you do things the way you do them. How does each component of the process contribute to success? How has the process improved over time? Then, document your process as it is now. Without documentation, it’s impossible to further analyze and improve on your process—let alone replicate it and scale it.

It’s likely that completing this shift in one aspect of your business, like how you deliver your service or create a podcast episode, will show you opportunities to shift away from attachment toward analysis in other areas of your business. With each process you bring attention to and cultivate, your business gets closer to becoming a well-oiled machine and breaking through that Ceiling.

YOUR TURN:

What results do you fixate on that are out of your control?

When do you over-deliver and why?

What are your personal expectations for your process and how it’s completed?

FROM DOER TO LEADER

THE DOER MINDSET

When things get tough your default mode is to pick up the slack and bury your head in the work.

THE LEADER MINDSET

You focus on where the business is headed and create the space needed for others to do the work to get there.

Business owners are, by nature, decisive action-takers. Their default mode is to spot a need and to fill it with their time and talents. Of course, this is how they ended up in business in the first place.

In the beginning, jumping in to fill a need or solve a problem is a superpower. I've heard stories of successful founders who would wake up in the middle of the night to answer customer support emails, who ordered delivery pizza for a month while they created and shipped their product. While I don't believe this kind of work is necessary for success, most business

owners do get their hands pretty dirty at the beginning.

Now, there's a good chance that those same business owners will *keep* getting their hands dirty. Maybe 2 or 3 (or 10) years down the line, they're still the first people to jump in when they see a need to fill or a problem to be solved.

WILL SWEET RELIEF EVER COME?

Nicole Lewis-Keeber, a therapist-turned-business coach who specializes in helping business owners identify destructive behavior and reset old patterns, writes, "In my business I see clients abusing themselves with what appear to be highly driven and success-gaining behaviors. They strive; hustle; they bust their asses; they work themselves silly; and yet, no matter what, they don't get relief."

It is tempting to think that, as your business grows, working a bit harder to solve a problem or meet a new challenge will result in eventual relief from the stress. It's easy to believe that putting your head down and doing the work will earn you the respect of your customers and team members. Unfortunately, this behavior creates a leadership vacuum.

In the second chapter, we explored the foundational shift from "in it" to "owning it." This chapter explores a further aspect of this change: the shift from doing to leading. This shift requires us to transition from

automatically responding by getting our hands dirty and to responding with leading the charge.

This isn't just a question of delegation or getting help fulfilling the mission of the business. It's a fundamental reworking of what's required of you as the leader and your behavior in that role.

DON'T BUG ME

My conversation with Kate Strathmann, the founder of Wanderwell, a bookkeeping and consulting firm based in Philadelphia, helped me see this shift in a new way. She told me, "I could happily sit in a room and think, write, and do the work and not talk to anyone for 3 days. And I wouldn't really notice! But that's not really helpful for a team. There were times I realized I was doing that and not available enough."

This is absolutely my default mode as a "doer" in my business. Not only am I ready to get my hands dirty in service of a new idea or project, but I'm prone to blocking out the rest of my team so that I can. I justify it by telling myself I'm saving them from having to deal with learning something new or doing messy work. But the truth is that I'm retreating to my comfort zone.

Kate remembered a newer team member expressing that he didn't feel like he could "bug" her. He had the impression that she needed to be left alone. She said, "That was a really big wake up call: oh, I'm doing that."

She realized it was how she was showing up and the energy she was putting off. She had created such strong boundaries around the value of her time and mental bandwidth so that she could focus on the work of the business, that she hadn't left room for her team. She wasn't supporting the business effectively.

Similarly, Sheryl Sandberg, COO at Facebook, shared a story on Reid Hoffman's podcast, *Masters of Scale*, about her time building the Google Adwords team. She noticed that they weren't able to hire as quickly as they needed to because she expected to interview everyone who joined the team. When she announced that she would stop interviewing every candidate, she expected her team members to tell her that she had to keep interviewing, that she knew what was best when it came to hiring. She said, "You know what they did? They applauded. And I thought to myself, 'I've become a bottleneck, and you didn't tell me — and that's on me.'"

Sheryl and Kate both identified that their penchant for putting their heads down and doing the work made it difficult for their team members to do their own jobs.

I'm guilty as charged on this one, too. My team members—who now include my husband—have often expressed that they don't want to "bother" me. That's a problem. I've missed out on important feedback, ideas, or opportunities for course correction because they haven't felt like my door was open. Most importantly, I've prevented them from doing their jobs while I try to do a job that is not my own.

To write this book, I decided to not fall into this trap again. In the past, I would have blocked off time during my workday and told my team I was unavailable. I'd close my inbox and put Slack on Do Not Disturb mode. But this time, I decided to do the work before business hours so that I would be available to lead my business, gather input from my team, and engage with our customers throughout the day.

Sure, I'm still doing the work of writing—but I'm also creating the space to lead and properly prioritize that function of my role.

Creating space to lead is really what it's all about. The more time you spend and glory you bestow on doing, the less space there is for leading. Kate discovered that little things like recurring meetings and open lines of communication have created the space for her to lead and her team to follow.

The transition for Kate hasn't been easy: "Some of it was having to get over myself. I would love to disappear for 3 days and think about these things and not talk to anybody. But that's a really me-centric way to be in this business as a leader and it's not in service to our team, our mission, or our clients. That was a real personal learning curve around just how I'm wired, figuring out how to shift my mindset and show up in a different way."

PRIORITIZING CULTURE SO OTHERS CAN DO THEIR JOBS

Lauren and Jason Pak are co-founders of Achieve Fitness in Boston, a functional fitness gym. They've experienced a similar transition. As they've grown their team and allowed the trainers who work for them to take a bigger role in guiding their tight-knit community. They've made sure to create the space to lead. For them, that means prioritizing their culture, values, and mission so that their team members know how to fill that space with work that's both good for the business and good for customers.

During weekly team meetings, the first thing they talk about is the positive contribution that trainers are having in the gym. Lauren told me, "The first thing is never going to be 'this is what we need to do better, our numbers are down...' We take 15-20 minutes to share things that happened in the gym that made everyone feel really good. It reminds us that we're doing this for a greater purpose."

It's such a simple thing but regularly checking in on what's most important and hearing from your team helps to center your focus as a leader. You'll help them feel validated and they'll recognize why their work truly matters. Incorporating these practices into your business help to not only shift you from doer to leader but from boss to leader. There's a big difference between telling people what to do and actually leading your business.

Thriving business owners allow themselves — what feels like — the luxury of actually leading. They set and maintain a vision. They help team members give meaning and purpose to boots-on-the-ground work. Most importantly, their team starts to look to them for leadership, not management.

Yes, this often means hard decisions about investing less of your personal time in tasks you love. For Kate, that might mean writing and exploring new ideas. For Lauren and Jason, that might mean training clients. For you, that might mean developing new products, recording podcast episodes, or writing blog posts. But these small sacrifices allow you to explore the promise of so much more for your company.

If you don't have a team yet, you can still make and benefit from this mindset shift. You can set aside time in your week—every week—to put the focus on vision, values, and eyes-wide-open communication with yourself. You can remind yourself what's going well and what's helping you accomplish your goals. And, you can cultivate an awareness of where there is a need for improvement. Building this system now will make incorporating team members into the process much easier.

If you do have team members, it's time to reevaluate your relationship to them. Are they worker bees who do what you tell them to do? Or, are they involved in decision-making and encouraged to contribute ideas in line with your goals and mission? Do they carefully

tread along your personal boundaries? Or, do they recognize your desire to involve them?

This subtle shift from doer to leader is an opportunity to establish the culture of your business and use it as an asset. When you do, you're setting yourself up for long-term success you simply can't access when you're stuck delegating, managing, and doing the work.

More on that in the next chapter.

YOUR TURN:

When are you most prone to doing the work instead of leading?

How can you make space and time to revisit the things—mission, values, culture—that drive others' ability to do the work?

Do your team members want to follow you? Can they follow you?

FROM DELEGATION TO OWNERSHIP

THE DELEGATION MINDSET

You assign tasks to team members so that you can get more done.

THE OWNERSHIP MINDSET

You and your team members own different areas of responsibility so that the business can create more value.

When you first start running out of time (or sanity) to run your business, the traditional first step is to find some help and delegate tasks that you don't really need to be doing.

You make a lower-level hire—a virtual assistant or customer support person, perhaps—and give them a list of things they can do: publish your blog posts, answer customer emails, format your newsletters,

schedule interviews, etc... It helps and you start to feel a sense of relief and your days aren't quite so full to the gills.

Then, the cycle starts again. You start running out of time (and sanity) and you look for relief. Maybe you hire more lower-level support. Maybe you hire a contractor to take a particular job off your plate (think social media, email marketing, web design, or business planning). Again, relief comes.

And soon enough, it's gone again.

This kind of delegation rarely solves the real problem and it often creates new ones. Instead of having a 1-person workload, you have a 1-person workload plus management responsibilities for 1 or more people. You become a bottleneck and absorb the stress of holding others back from doing their own work.

What is the real problem? At an early stage, you bare the responsibility for every functional aspect of your business. Delegation takes tasks off of your list but it doesn't absolve you of the responsibility.

The real solution—and the subtle shift we're examining here—is to stop delegating tasks and to start handing off responsibility.

SNACK DUTY

When my family goes hiking, my 10-year-old daughter is in charge of the snacks. With some

guidance from the adults without a sugar obsession, she selects what we bring, helps to make sandwiches when necessary, and packs up the lot. Most of the time, she even elects to put the majority of snacks in her own pack and carry them on her own.

Now, if you're suspecting that this is a ploy to get her more engaged in the hike itself, you'd be right. If you're suspecting that we give her a sense of responsibility so that she takes the endeavor seriously, you'd be right again.

We don't just ask for her help with the snacks. We put her in charge of them. This is an important distinction. The kid likes to help—for sure—but she loves to be in charge of things. She loves putting her own spin on the work she's doing. Not to mention I don't have to direct her every move! She knows what she wants to pack and where it lives in the kitchen.

Plus, she's much more likely to contribute an original idea or solution when she's in charge.

Your team members are the same way. Yet, we don't often treat them with the same respect or consideration.

As your business has grown, it's likely seemed like delegation could fix what ails you when it comes to a full to-do list, packed calendar, and an overflowing brain. The more you delegate, the more you can accomplish. At first, everywhere you look, there's an odd task that can be delegated to someone else.

Then, at the end of the day, you realize that all the work you've just delegated comes back to you in the form of Slack messages, emails, Asana tasks, and meetings for approval. You're inundated with the product of your delegation — and suddenly, doing it all yourself starts to feel like a better option... again.

PUT THEM IN CHARGE

Believe it or not, relying on delegation is one of the biggest reasons businesses stay stuck at the Ceiling. Obviously, it's not that delegation is bad—delegation helps you get a handle on your own workload as your business starts to grow—but it won't get you past the Ceiling.

On the other hand, thriving business owners treat their team members like they truly have something to contribute: they put them in charge. They hire people who can see a project through from start to finish. They trust their team members to make decisions on the work they own. Their team members identify how the work they do is tied to the goals the business is working toward and make adjustments accordingly.

This is the shift from simply delegating tasks to offering your team members ownership over projects, departments, or outcomes. At first, this is a scary step. Your business might have felt like your baby all this time and you're about to put her in someone else's hands. That person isn't just changing a diaper while you observe from the other room, they're feeding her,

clothing her, educating her, and, when it's time, telling her about the birds and the bees.

If you already have team members, this will be a scary step for them, too. Maybe they've been itching to take on a bigger role or fantasizing about heading up a project but, when it finally comes time to take ownership, they will probably get pretty nervous. You'll have to do some coaching around what is their responsibility, what needs to get passed on to you, and where they have creative or strategic free reign. Luckily, in that process of coaching, you'll be able to integrate this subtle shift into your mindset and let go of some of your own sense of ownership.

MORE THAN A MINDSET SHIFT

The shift from delegation to ownership can carry with it some operational changes, too.

Charlie Gilkey, the co-founder of Productive Flourishing, told me that he sees business owners hiring contractors to delegate to but taking on the emotional responsibility of hiring an employee. “Unfortunately what people do is hire independent contractors and freelancers but they'll accept the employer responsibility to keep them working and keep them paid but not necessarily get the employee responsibility for the reciprocity of that... that that freelancer is going to show up and be a part of that business in the same way.”

Charlie pointed out that often the drive to delegate creates undue burden on the business owner without the payoff of having employees that can actually own their jobs, take responsibility for their results, and look toward their place in the future of your business. Sure, you might get the short term relief of having an email written for you or a website update completed while you sleep but are the people doing those tasks contributing to the long-term success of your business?

I asked Jaime Masters, founder of Eventual Millionaire and creator of OwnerBox, how hiring her first employee—someone obligated to show up at a certain time and work in a certain way—as opposed to a contractor changed her approach. She said, “It made me show up in a different way... It made me more dedicated. Not that I wasn’t dedicated but it made me put roots down.”

The shift from simply delegating work to asking team members to take ownership will have you reexamining your own sense of ownership. Like Jaime, I experienced this first hand after hiring my own first employees. I kept a more regular schedule. I paid more attention to strategy and the health of the business. And, I made more objective decisions about things further in the future. I put down roots, too.

REEXAMINE YOUR OWN SENSE OF OWNERSHIP

Through observation and personal experience, I believe that it’s extremely easy for business owners to misjudge their own sense of ownership over the direction and growth of their businesses. When everything falls on you, it’s easy to believe that you’ll pick the pieces up if something goes wrong. It’s easy to rely on your own ability to dig in and do a little more if needed. It’s easy to attribute success to your own brilliant ideas.

When you give your team ownership, your own contributions start to have more context. Yes, you’re in charge. Yes, you’re the reason the business exists. Yes, you have to wear multiple hats but now you have a very clear role to fill. No one else is doing that job. You can no longer hide behind a pages-long to-do list. You have to be the owner.

To those on the outside, it might seem like a small change but, to you, it will change everything. Be prepared to love it and hate it at the same time. Be prepared to find yourself both rebelling against and reveling in the change. Continue to choose ownership for both your team members and for yourself.

To be clear: this is a mindset change, not simply a decision to turn your contractors into employees. For small business owners, I’ve found that this operational decision and the mindset change often do go hand in hand. However, this is a problem that can also beset business owners who hire employees early and don’t have a plan for how they can contribute to the long-term success of the business.

Whether you've already started hiring, have a team of folks you trust, or you're looking to take the first steps, now is the time to take a pause and create a map for how you'll guide their sense of ownership. In a larger organization, this might look more like a traditional "org chart." In a small business with just a small handful of team members, you'll need to get creative.

Defining the ownership that you're giving to each team member is the most important thing. But still this means you need to get clear on the ownership you've given yourself. Are you simply "business owner?" Likely not. You're most likely business owner, owner of marketing, and owner of finance—or whatever combination is happening in your business. Expect you'll wear several hats for the time being but continue to work towards not wearing *all* the hats.

Starting to see your business as opportunities for ownership instead of tasks to be delegated will help you see that you have much more capacity for growth than you realized.

YOUR TURN:

What roles do you own in your business?

Do your team members have clear areas of responsibility or a list of tasks to be done?

What are you currently delegating that comes back to you unnecessarily?

FROM IMPOSED ACCOUNTABILITY TO PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

THE IMPOSED ACCOUNTABILITY MINDSET

Because you don't trust yourself to do what needs to be done, you seek out consequences for inaction.

THE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY MINDSET

You own your goals and the actions they require.

As I've mentioned, my morning routine has evolved around a physical fitness practice for the last 2 years. But adopting that practice wasn't my first attempt at incorporating fitness into my life.

A year before I started working out regularly, I hired a personal trainer because I thought it would be good to lose some of the weight I'd gained in recent years. I hoped working out would give me more energy and help improve other habits at the same time. Plus, plenty of my business owner friends had trainers. It seemed like the thing to do.

I went to the trainer's house and did what she told me to do for an hour. It was painful. It sucked. I hated it. I went back 2 or 3 more times before I gave up. She texted me several times encouraging me to come back. She reminded me that I had already paid for several more sessions but I never went back.

When I set about making a change a year later, I had different goals. My real goal was becoming the leader my business needed me to be. I had looked around at all of my friends who ran companies like what I wanted to run and they were all athletes of one form or another: CrossFit, yoga, running, climbing. They all made physical health a priority.

This time, without a trainer and without spending any money, I made the decision to start exercising and never looked back. It often sucked. I often hated it. But I stuck with it.

I had hired a personal trainer because I wanted someone to impose accountability on me. I didn't trust myself. I assumed I would fail without outside management and encouragement. I didn't care

enough about my goal to get through the worst parts of making a change.

I succeeded a year later because I had found something I cared enough about to assume responsibility for my own actions and decisions. I trusted myself to do what it would take. I assumed success. I found personal responsibility.

WHY CAN'T SOMEONE TELL ME WHAT TO DO

I've observed plenty of business owners who are looking for—essentially—a personal trainer for their businesses. Maybe you too have thought this would be helpful. You might want an operations person who will “manage up.” You might be looking for a buddy who will remind you of all the things you said you were going to do and wag their finger when you don't. Or, you might be looking for a coach who will lay it all out for you with an easy to follow the plan.

It won't work. And, on the off chance that it does, it means that you didn't need it in the first place.

As Brian Moran writes in the *12 Week Year*, these actions “reflect the mistaken notion that accountability is something that can and must be imposed; that's not accountability, that's consequences. In fact, it is impossible to hold someone else accountable. I like to joke that you can hold a baby and you can hold a bag of groceries, but you can't hold someone accountable. Accountability is not consequences, but ownership.”

That sense of ownership comes from knowing the true stakes of your actions. That includes being so wrapped up in the positive outcome of your vision for your business, your customers, and yourself that you can't help but act in accordance with it. It also includes knowing that the consequences of *not* achieving that vision are so much more heinous than any accountability buddy, operations manager, or coach could impose on you.

Your action and accountability come from your clarity of purpose, vision, and passion—not from outside sources.

What I've found is that most business owners bumping up against their Ceiling have, throughout the course of their businesses, experienced this kind of personal responsibility. But, it's been unreliable. It's a crap shoot whether the project they're currently working on will peter out in a few weeks due to disinterest or whether they'll see it through and produce results.

Why? Business owners at this stage are often disconnected from their vision, passion, and purpose. They've focused so much on the work—creating a solution, telling people about it, and delivering it to the people who buy—that they've lost sight of the bigger idea behind the business. Perhaps, as we discussed in the second chapter, there was no bigger idea to begin with.

BE THE RIVER

Metaphorically speaking, it's the difference between a river and the temporary stream that forms in your backyard when it rains too hard.

When you're out of touch with the bigger picture behind your business, like the backyard stream that only forms when there's a downpour, you only find your personal responsibility when the idea of a particular project is exciting enough to start the flow. Even though the current can sweep away leaves, sticks, and the occasional rubber ball, it will eventually slow to a trickle, puddle up, and evaporate.

On the other hand, for a business owner who has clarity of vision, purpose, and passion, the current never stops. They have a river of inspiration, motivation, and stick-to-itiveness that never dries up. They do what needs to be done because their personal ownership of their vision demands it. While their excitement over any individual project might ebb, the steady current of their vision keeps them engaged.

Consider what happens when you become a parent. Your baby cries and you feed her. She dirties a diaper and you change it. You make sure the car seat is latched properly. You pull yourself out of bed when she wakes up in the middle of the night. Becoming a parent is an exhausting, never ending stream of tasks you attend to.

Yet, you do what needs to be done. There are consequences if you don't, sure. The authorities will

come if you're not doing the bare minimum to care for your child. But that's not why you do it. You don't take care of your child because there are consequences imposed on you if you don't take care of her. You do it because it matters to you.

Vanessa Van Edwards, the founder of Science of People and a new parent herself, finds her personal responsibility in the relationship she has to her team and her audience. She says, "I have readers, partners, employees that I feel accountable to."

It's not that they're holding her accountable, of course. Her readers inspire her to see her work through. She says, "I spent so many years struggling, with no readers and no income. Now that I have what I worked for, I have to give them my all. This is wonderful and terrifying."

Michelle Warner, a business strategist and former startup CEO, agrees that true accountability is internal—not external. When she started her current business, she signed up for an accountability program and soon found herself lying to her coach instead of doing the work she said she was going to do. She quickly canceled.

She discovered that, to find her personal responsibility, she needed to shift from an emphasis on goals and outcomes to an emphasis on showing up and working the process. She says, "Personal accountability to goals made me feel like crap and beat up on myself, personal accountability to showing up

keeps me moving forward with empathy and care and that's what I need to stay happy and productive."

So in order to achieve the shift from imposed accountability to personal responsibility, you need to find a clarity of vision and purpose. You need to find the passion for your business. It has to go beyond simply enjoying the work you do because that work is changing and there will absolutely be times you don't want to do what is necessary. It has to point at the heart of why that work matters.

Which begs the question: why does the work of your business matter? Why does your business matter? Why are you doing all of this in the first place?

Not every business owner has an answer to this question that they find personally satisfying—yet. That, in and of itself, is not a reason to panic. Evolving the work, your understanding of why it matters, and your relationship to that work is part of this shift to personal responsibility and the path to breaking through the Ceiling.

YOUR TURN:

When is it easiest to do the most challenging work?

When do you find yourself endlessly procrastinating? And why?

What about your business motivates you the most?

FROM SKILL BUILDING TO DECISION MAKING

THE SKILL BUILDING MINDSET

You learn new skills as a means of figuring out what to do next with your business.

THE DECISION MAKING MINDSET

You make decisions based on your goals, past experience, and analysis of the current situation.

My 10-year-old daughter plays basketball. She's starting to get really into it, which is great because I also love basketball.

Many of my early memories of playing basketball involve my dad, who loved the game. My dad was a stickler for getting the basics down. I can remember just bounce passing, dribbling, and doing layups for hours on end. He made sure that I had the basics down

before I tried anything even remotely advanced—like a jump shot.

I got the message very early on that basic skills were what made a great basketball player—not trick shots or dribbling through your legs.

My dad also made sure that I understood how the game worked. He would explain gameplay and strategy as I watched older kids or the pros. He took me along to pick-up games with his friends whenever he could.

I learned both the skills and how the game worked. That way, while I was playing a game, I could see opportunities to make a play—and make it happen. I could notice when the other team had a weakness that we could exploit. I could talk to my fellow team members about what was happening on the court and create a game plan. My foundational skills and knowledge of the game meant I could make the best split-second decisions on the court and lead my team.

My daughter's experience with basketball started similarly. Her league also puts an emphasis on basic skills and all of the coaches diligently teach the players to dribble and pass. But then, they introduced the screen.

In basketball, a screen is a maneuver that allows you to block a defender without fouling them, allowing your teammate to get open to pass or shoot. It's a handy move, for sure. Unfortunately, the girls skipped

straight from basic skill building to executing plays involving a screen.

They never really learned to play the game. They have skills but no understanding of how the game actually works.

They don't understand *why* they're executing a screen and they don't understand what to do once a screen has been executed. They can't make decisions about when to shoot, dribble, or pass—screen or no screen—because they don't have a feel for the gameplay.

Luckily, I've been able to teach my daughter why you screen and how it fits into the game. And, fortunately, I'm not the kind of parent who's going to get into a volunteer coach's face about how the game should be taught. I just want these girls to love the game—and to love the game, you have to go beyond learning *how* to do things and start being able to make decisions on your own in the midst of play.

LEARN HOW THE GAME IS PLAYED

When you first start your business, it seems like the answer to every challenge is a new skill you need to learn. Instead of learning to pass or dribble, you learn new marketing, product development, and time management skills.

Maybe you learn to design a website yourself. Maybe you put your effort into learning how to write better

copy. Maybe you learn the ins and outs of networking, sales conversations, pricing, or project management.

Learning new skills to solve problems gives you a toolkit you can rely on to overcome challenges and make your business work.

As your business matures, you're still learning—of course—but it's not a matter of skill-building. Now you're in it. You're getting a feel for how the game is played. You need to make decisions on the fly. It might even feel like it's always the 4th quarter, your team is down by 2, and you've got the ball.

It's tempting to try to come up with new skills to learn to your solve problems—every business coach and information marketer is waiting to convince you that the skill they teach is the solution. Yet, it's the game-time split-second decisions that end up providing the win.

This shift from skill building to decision making is one of the trickiest transitions that's required to get past the Ceiling. Entrepreneurs are lifelong learners. We *want* there to be a new skill we can learn to move the business forward.

But, more often than not, there aren't new skills to be learned. There are decisions to be made.

Do you revamp an offer or retire it? Do you invest in advertising or publicity? Do you hire a team member or streamline your service delivery? And because these

are game-time decisions, you might not even notice that there are decisions to be made. You might not see all the options or consider all of the repercussions.

I spoke with a business owner the other day who is bumping up against his own Ceiling. He told me that the way he approaches his business has changed a lot recently. He used to read all the blogs and emails that small business experts sent out to learn what to do with his business next. But he was tired of expecting each new message to be a lesson about how he was doing everything wrong and needed to learn skill X instead.

He *isn't* doing everything wrong. While there is plenty left to learn, he knows what he needs to do and that some of the growth he wants will come from time—not new skills. That all said, he does still get stuck. When a challenge or opportunity pops up that he wasn't expecting, he can feel unprepared to make a decision.

From what I've observed over the years, this scenario plays out for almost every business owner. They get to a point where they realize they're doing well and they've learned the necessary skills—but they're still not where they want to be. They're out of easy answers and obvious solutions. They need to start relying on consistent decision-making to guide their business toward their goal.

It's not only a shift from skill building to decision making. It's a shift from dependence to self-reliance.

There are plenty of blueprints, frameworks, and formulas for turning a new business into one that generates \$100,000 or more per year. There are far fewer for reliably turning a \$100k business into a \$1,000,000 business.

Earning your first \$100,000 with your business is a set of skills you can learn. Turning a business that generates more than \$100k into one that generates more than \$1 million is most often a process of consistently deciding to do more of what works and getting out of your own way while you do it. For as easy as that might sound, it's a process you'll need to carefully manage and adapt as you go. No one can tell you the exact steps you need to take to get where you want to go.

Yet, self-reliance doesn't mean you do everything on your own. It doesn't mean you shut yourself away from the world to build your empire.

In fact, to become more self-reliant, you need to gather the input of others who have been there before. Their experiences and hard lessons learned inform your next steps. Their successes show you new opportunities. They don't tell you how to run your business—they inspire you to find your own path.

I asked Mike McDerment, who turned his experience starting a design and marketing agency into the wildly successful software company, Freshbooks, how he learned to run a company of this size. He chuckled:

“What gives you so much confidence I’ve got it figured out? You’re right. It’s a very scary thing... perhaps one of the most rewarding things has been the forced learning curve as a leader I’ve had to go on to figure out the rest of this stuff.”

“The things that have helped me along the way are, first of all, a passion for what we’re doing and why we do it so I could change not only the business but myself. And then it’s who you surround yourself with.”

You might not want to run a software company like Mike does. Maybe you don't want a team of hundreds of employees or to serve hundreds of thousands of customers. But you do want to run a thriving, profitable business that helps more people than it helps today—and you already have a track record of success. You are so much more like Mike than you realize.

According to Mike, you have at least half of the equation for creating the business you dream about: you have a passion for what you do and why you do it. Every day, that passion is inspiring you to become a more creative thinker, a better leader, and a more resilient business owner. Making good decisions, doing most things mostly right, serving happy customers, and growing your bottom line slowly but surely. Your passion has gotten you this far.

In order to continue your progress, you'll need what Mike and so many other business owners have discovered is the difference between continuing to succeed and stagnating.

To put it in today's parlance, you need a squad.

The people you surround yourself with help you define who you are as a leader, provide critical feedback when you need it most, and—most importantly—supply the information you need to make the best decisions for your business. They cannot only help you build the skills you need, but they can also help you learn to play the game.

If you were on the basketball court, they'd be your team members. Without them, you'd have no one to pass to or make plays with. You'd have no one to confer with during timeouts.

Your squad is there for you as you make split-second decisions. They help you navigate unexpected challenges and opportunities. They help you see past blind spots and navigate dark corners.

I know from experience.

A few months ago, I had a big business decision on my mind. I had been stewing on it for weeks. My brain was never *not* working on weighing the options, looking for hidden opportunities, trying to find a solution.

So much so that I wasn't sleeping. I found it difficult to concentrate during conversations with my husband. During team meetings, I could only participate with half of my brain power because I was trying to work

things out with the other half. I couldn't turn it off—because the decision I needed to make was a big one.

I'm a bit ashamed of how long it took me to take the action I knew I needed to take all along... but everyone makes mistakes. When the decision started to feel like a genuine crisis, I wrote a single email to 4 women—my small business squad. Some had been in the same situation before but I knew all of them would have a valuable perspective to share with me.

I laid out the problem. I told them about potential solutions. Most importantly, I let them know I was stuck. The responses came flooding in. We hopped on a conference call. We hashed things out. I made a decision.

I immediately started sleeping again.

And when my eyes *would* pop open 30 minutes before my already early alarm went off, it was because I was excited to get started with work—*not* because I was worried about my decision.

DECISION-MAKING IS A TEAM SPORT

Take Jason Van Orden. In September of 2005, Jason co-founded the first ever podcast about internet business and online marketing. It quickly became one of the top business podcasts in the world. To this day it's one of the most profitable podcasts on Apple Podcasts, having generated millions of dollars in sales directly from the show.

And then, a couple of years ago, Jason realized he had fallen out of love with the business he was a co-owner of. He knew he needed to make a decision about where he was headed next. He told me, “There were a good several months there where I tried to get through it just by myself. Because I have this horrible habit of being a rugged individualist.”

Most business owners can relate to this sentiment. After all, it’s one of the reasons we’re in business in the first place.

In the early stages of a business, this personality quirk serves us well. We put our heads down. We learn new skills. We keep our eyes on our own work. We build the foundation for something new.

However, keeping your head down for too long can end up keeping you stuck. You end up *creating* problems instead of solving them. You miss opportunities instead of taking advantage of them.

Luckily, Jason didn’t keep his head down for too long. He realized that his rugged individualism wasn’t getting him closer to making a decision about the path he would take. He said that, once he made the shift, he “immediately started having conversations with people, connecting with old colleagues again.”

It wasn’t a choice that came naturally to him. But it was an uncomfortable choice that paid off. He told me, “I just started setting up conversations and reaching out.

That reminded me that, wow, everybody I talk to is going through *something*, dealing with something hard in their business, despite the polished sheen of what you see online. They’re dealing with their own thing.”

What I’ve learned over the years is that we can’t effectively make the subtle shift toward decision-making until we also make a shift to sharing our challenges with others. Decision-making is a team sport. You might be the only one who can make the decision, but you can’t make it well without input, feedback, and support from others.

YOUR TURN:

When do you find yourself hoping others will tell you what to do next? When do you rely on yourself and the information you gather from trusted sources?

When are you most likely to hide away with a big decision? When are you most likely to ask for help?

Who do you trust most and how can you reach out to them more often?

EPILOGUE

Before I wrap this up, I want to say, “Congratulations!” No, not because you finished this small book on mindset but because you’ve made it to a point in your business where you recognize you might be holding yourself back from greater success.

You’ve already accomplished so much. You’re already playing a much bigger game than you expected to when you started out. You’ve already changed lives with the product you’ve created or the service you deliver.

The path ahead of you is different from the path you’ve taken to get to this incredible spot on your journey.

If you’re like me, paying attention to the things I’ve described in this book won’t come naturally. I’ve had to give special attention to each and every one of the mindset shifts I’ve described here. In fact, I made a point of incorporating an attention to the little things into every area of my life over the last year.

When I listed out my personal goals for 2018, I included spending “as much time on form and technique as trying new things.” I wanted to make sure I didn’t try to rush ahead or make unnecessary wholesale changes in my process—whether in business, fitness, or my relationships. This was not a small commitment.

All my life, I’ve favored big changes, fast action, and new discoveries. This preference has largely served me well. It helped me to start a business, to choose where I live, and to take up new healthy habits. Taking things more slowly, spending time dissecting my actions and decisions—that was the real challenge.

I can’t say that I’ve earned an A-plus on form and technique this year, by any means. Yet, I’ve learned quite a bit from a more measured approach. I’ve also accomplished things that I didn’t, at first, believe I could do.

Most importantly, though, I’ve learned that paying attention to the little things has a huge impact on my ability to succeed. This has been true in every area of my life.

Paying attention to the little things has also reminded me that everything is a process. Think of each of the mindset shifts I’ve described here as two ends of a timeline. You’ll spend much more time in the middle of that line than you will on either end. Just when you think you’ve “made the change,” you’ll notice a lingering remnant of the earlier mindset—and another

and another. I am regularly reminded how far I have yet to go.

FINAL WORDS

Business can feel like it’s happening to you at a mile per minute. It can seem like things are constantly changing and that you’re at the whim of a lightning-fast market. It might feel like you’re always a bit behind and that you need to keep your focus on just putting one foot in front of the other.

However, if what you’ve read here resonates with you, I encourage you—implore you—to set your own goal to focus on form and technique. Put your focus on the little things. Allow yourself to slow down and pay attention.

You might first wonder if such small changes and subtle shifts can really make a difference. Little by little, you’ll start to see the results. Then, one day, you’ll look what you’ve built and the person you’ve become and realize just how big those subtle changes were.

PLAYLIST



You can find full-length interviews with most of the business owners I cited in this book on my podcast, What Works. I've linked to the individual episodes in the order they appear in the book.

1. [Scaling Mental Health Services With Move Forward Counseling Founder Alison Pidgeon](#)
2. [Playing Big With A Boutique Music Licensing Company With Catch The Moon Music Founder Cathy Heller](#)
3. [Teaching Live Courses For Maximum Results With Sarah Von Bargaen](#)
4. [Combining Creativity And Productivity To Do Great Work With Audience Of One Author Srinivas Rao](#)
5. [More Leading, Less Managing With Wanderwell Founder Kate Strathmann](#)
6. [Establishing Authority With Standout Content On Instagram With Achieve Fitness Founders Lauren & Jason Pak](#)
7. [The Art of Management-For One Or Many-With Productive Flourishing Co-Founder Charlie Gilkey](#)
8. [Building For Business & Life With Your Spouse With Productive Flourishing Co-Founders Charlie Gilkey & Angela Wheeler](#)
9. [Engineering Happiness For Yourself & Your Team With The Science Of People Founder Vanessa Van Edwards](#)
10. [Hacking Wellness For Time Management Success With Business Strategist Michelle Warner](#)
11. [Reinventing Your Product-Twice-With Freshbooks Co-Founder Mike McDerment](#)
12. [Building A New Business From His "Unique Genius" With Jason Van Orden](#)

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CONNECT

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Tara McMullin is the founder & CEO of CoCommercial, a platform connecting small business owners so they can overcome challenges, solve problems, and achieve goals. She's also the host of What Works, a podcast that takes you behind the scenes of successful small businesses to show you what's *really* working.

Her work has been featured in Fast Company, Forbes, Inc, DesignSponge, and The Huffington Post. She's also a bestselling Money & Life instructor on CreativeLive.