

Real Life Leadership
By Ed Brenegar
Asheville Citizen-Times
April 23, 2007

Small-business owners need to recognize a time of transition.

Question: I have a small business and know that things are not working right. I'm working as hard as I ever have, but just don't seem to be getting anywhere. Where do I start to change so that I can be successful again?

Answer: Working hard and not doing as well as you used to do means that you have entered a transition period in your business' life. You are moving from one stage to the next, from either improved performance or further decline. Recognizing when your performance has begun to plateau is the sign that it is time to make changes.

It is important to know why you are at a plateau or in decline. It may be external circumstances, such as changes in the marketplace, the decline in your location or a competitor's new product line. You have the least control over these factors in your business.

Internal factors may also contribute to the decline. It could be the skill level of your employees has slipped. You could be carrying too much debt to afford to upgrade equipment and materials. Or your policies, procedures and practices are not competitive in the marketplace. Any number of internal factors can contribute to a falling of performance.

The most serious internal factor is the loss of leadership focus and perspective. Small business leaders get tired, and as they do stress builds up. They end up losing touch with their business.

To change this pattern of decline, first, begin by getting more sleep, improving your diet and getting some regular exercise. If you are not physically and mentally at your best, you will not have the energy to make the changes that are necessary for your business.

Second, get your finances in order. Pay off as much debt as you can and hold off on out-of-the-ordinary expenditures that may not be needed after you have begun to make changes.

Third, you need to stop two kinds of work. Stop doing work that is not part of your core business. It's a distraction. Stop doing work that costs more than what you can charge. It's a resource drain. Do so gradually, but do it.

Every business experiences change. We can view it as chaotic and disruptive, or as a period of transition from one stage to the next. The key is recognizing when the transition starts and then stop doing certain things and start doing new ones that lead toward new opportunities.

When you sense that you are entering a transition period, try asking the following four questions.

1. In the future, what kind of impact do I want to have through my business? Be specific.
2. Who are the people, groups, businesses, and communities that would most benefit from my product or service? Focus on them.
3. What opportunities would I then have?
4. What problems do I need to resolve?

Transitions come to us all. There is no staying the same. As a result, personal leadership growth leads to future business growth.

This is the opinion of Ed Brenegar, a leadership consultant and coach in Western North Carolina. He can be reached at ed@edbrenegar.com and additional commentary read at <http://edbrenegar.typepad.com>.