When to Work *In* Not *On* Your Business

If your mantra is "I need to work on the business not in it"… be careful, you could be setting yourself up for a nasty fall.

Since the early 90's when Michael Gerber's brilliant book The E Myth hit a chord with small business owners around the world; we have all embraced the concept and enthusiastically adopted the catch-cry of working in the business. But be warned, there are times in your business when it is the worst possible thing you could do.

For instance, when you are in the Start Up phase you need to work in the business so you have a good understanding of how things work. It is not until you have done all the data entry on your bookkeeping software and seen the monthly reports that you will have an idea of how money does or doesn't flow through your business. These insights into cash flow are critical when it comes to realistically planning for the future. And then there is the sales process, unless you have been face to face with the customer, actively selling, you will be missing valuable feedback on your product and service. In start-up you need to embrace being the "worker" and use the experience to build your knowledge about business. If you take your finger off the pulse too soon, your business won't thrive and you will never get the opportunity to work on it.

Owners with businesses in the Consolidation phase who are experiencing the 7 year glitch may also need to jump back into the business to diagnose what is happening. Many business owners at this stage have a team of staff, complex systems, software and equipment that handle a lot of the day to day business transactions. When things start to wobble or go wrong it's time to roll up your sleeves and buckle down to working in the business. It's a fact that no matter how great your staff you will be able to trouble shoot much quicker because you have more inside knowledge on how the business works. Spending a couple of months working in the business gives you a chance to fix systems, source new equipment and even retrain staff so you can go back to a more leisurely existence focusing on strategies, for business development.

It is also a good idea to work in the business whenever you are considering tackling new markets or undertaking major growth and expansion. Spend more time at your desk and keep your eyes open for changes that may sabotage your plans for expansion. It's a chance to check systems and see how they will cope with increased volume. More time in the office will also mean you get a better idea of customer service and how your team are interacting with clients. A very entrepreneurial client of mine used to spend 80% of his time working on the business. He was always off at meetings discussing new ventures, developing new product concepts and looking for the next new profit stream. He had a great team so he was really comfortable letting them handle the day to day.

However, he noticed that there had been some absenteeism and a client mentioned it just wasn't the same without him, so he decided to spend a month in the office. He was amazed to discover that morale was poor because the team had lost track of the vision, he wasn't there to provide the leadership the staff needed. Over time staff had changed and tasks had been deselected from job descriptions. No one was making follow up calls, they had changed printers and marketing material was looking cheap and nasty and the website hadn't been updated in ages. He told me that the month working in the business was one of his best ever. His staff loved having him around and became enthusiastic about the business once again … he spent more time seeing clients and rebuilt some important relationships. Best of all he came up with a couple of great ideas for taking the business to the next level.

So, make sure you aren't just working on the business for the sake of it … Sometimes it makes perfect sense to go back to basics and work in the business.