

# Is Your Business Stuck?

How Leaders Get Outside the Box



BY  
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“**G**etting stuck” happens to the best of entrepreneurs. Whether the biggest employer in a small town or a family business in a big city, they often find themselves in critical transitions such as losing customers, market share, money or the dream of leaving a family legacy.

Business owners often unknowingly put themselves in a box and stay there, with business processes and go-to-market strategies stagnant. What’s more, many industries are going through fundamental changes—such as overseas manufacturing—yet many owners are slow to adapt. For starters, they need to consider new ways to serve customers, improve automation and make investments in capital equipment that will pay off. Yet forward-thinking strategies seem impossible while struggling through a transition.

Three common signs of “getting stuck” include:

**Sign 1: Working with the same people for too many years.** Long-time employees are loyal but they aren’t innovative enough to help the business get “unstuck” during a business decline. Outside ideas are needed to change market approaches, streamline work processes and apply new trends. Owners should strive for management balance between experienced people from inside and “new blood” from outside the organization.

**Sign 2: Fighting fires on a regular basis; always operating in a reactive mode.** Even while losing money every month, there’s no clear plan to change. Owners should step back and look proactively at how the business could run differently.

**Sign 3: An increased reliance on a small handful of customers.** This is a major vulnerability for any business and can come from a compensation program that rewards salespeople for maintaining customers rather than finding new ones.

In many cases, business owners can easily make a bad situation worse due to leadership limitations. A change of the owner’s mindset is important—from “the business needs me” and “I’m in charge!”—to putting the organization first as a leader and developer of people.

Important leadership steps toward getting through a transition include:

**1) Letting others make decisions by mentoring them.** When employees rely on the owner for all decision-making, there’s no room for growth and new ideas. Owners should ask questions that help employees see the rationale behind good decisions, such as “What options do you see to solve this problem?” “Which option would you choose and why?” If there are options they haven’t considered, offer alternatives and then allow employees time to think before making a final choice. This approach grows a sense of accomplishment and people’s ability to handle more responsibility.

**2) Setting up accountability processes.** To encourage and monitor good decision-making, the owner should be the voice of accountability: How do we work the plan? How soon will this project be done? How are we doing? Systematic follow up on issues that others are assigned to complete is the mark of a proactive leader.

**3) Looking for both formal and informal learning opportunities.** Constant learning about the world outside of the organization contributes to becoming a better leader. Examples include peer-to-peer groups, outside training, coaching, books, magazines, trade organizations, and business events.

**4) Gaining satisfaction by making others successful rather than taking all the credit.** For example, celebrate employee accomplishments even though they may have done it differently than the owner. While becoming a better trainer by helping people learn, an owner can move from day-to-day management to more proactive strategies.

**5) Getting better positioned.** Look at the business through the eyes of customers and consider how to realign the business model to make it easier for others to work with you. This may be as easy as a once a week proactive phone call with major customers to discuss inventory levels or track production schedules.

Getting “unstuck” doesn’t happen overnight yet owners that provide strong leadership have developed a team that is capable of solving problems during a decline in business. In the process, owners have more time and energy to grasp a vision and look outside the box. **MB**

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