

Excuses, Excuses

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Running a business can be hard. So are most things that are worthwhile. That's what makes it interesting. What amazes me is how many small-business owners work harder than they have to, make less than they can, and end up leaving a lot of money on the table when they finally exit.

When I talk with business owners about why things aren't going right, I hear lots of things. "Didn't get the right breaks." "Lost my best client when we could least afford it." "So-and-so let us down." "The economy turned against us." "Can't trust anyone else to do it right." "It just wasn't meant to be." A great business doesn't just happen. It is created by the standards we set, the performance we demand. Leadership is key – and that buck stops on the owner's desk.

In my experience, the game is won or lost in the day-to-day rush of activities. It takes too long to explain things, so we do it ourselves. We figure there will be time tomorrow to explain to everyone where we are going, and why it's worth the effort. We accept mediocre performance from some. We tolerate excuses from others. We depend so much on our top performers, we take them for granted.

We can set high standards. It is up to us, as owners, to set the bar, and hold to it. We have to have confidence our people are up to a challenge. Publish

standards for each job in your company. Declare what you will measure, and be prepared to follow through. Ask your people to report to you, and teach them how to do exactly that. Say things like, "Get me a report every Monday, to show me your progress." "Send me an email update every couple of days, so I can stay in touch with your progress." "If you're stuck, let me know, and tell me what kind of help you'd like." When employees struggle we have to be there to support them, teach them, show them how to do it better, and then be firm about expecting results. Practice this, and your job gets easier, because the people around you know what you expect.

We can demand people give us their best. Don't accept the excuses that get dished out; call people on them. Look at your own behavior and be sure you measure up. We all make excuses – and we need to be more conscious of how that gets in the way of getting things done. It doesn't take a big discussion. It can be as simple as saying, "That's an excuse, get back to me with a result." "Don't do that anymore." "I'm calling you on that." Explain that you need and expect performance. Ask employees to identify areas where they struggle the most, or where they need the most help. Look for employees who are strong enough to admit when they are wrong. These are the

people you can rely on, to back you up and make your job easier.

We all need to show up ready to perform to the best of our ability. We have to encourage risk taking and be willing to learn from trial and error. Making mistakes is okay. Blindly repeating mistakes is unacceptable. Sometimes all you have to say is, "Don't do that again." If people continue to be stuck in their ways, be prepared to do something about it, including helping them to move on, if necessary. Surround yourself with people who get excited and say things like, "I enjoy challenges." "I can do this!" "I am not going to give up!" "Failure is not an option!" When interviewing, ask candidates for examples of how they have handled failure and challenges. Ask potential employees how they handle fear and pressure. Look for people who practice getting stronger, by seeking out uncomfortable and challenging situations. There's a Sara Jessica Parker ad on the radio these days, in which she says that if it scares her, that's when she knows it's something worth doing. Stretch your limits, and continually test your potential – it's another form of daily exercise.

We need to regularly share our thoughts about where we are going. If you keep it to yourself and don't bother to reach out, you can't expect other people to support you or help you. Design a program to meet your goals, and



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work that program each day, with everyone in your company involved. You will not get your company where you want it to go by yourself. Regularly offer up praise and appreciation. It's simple: "Thank you, I value what you did," and "your action was really helpful." Be positive and engage in learning new things all the time. You are likely to attract like-minded people, who will encourage your company to grow.

Create a value proposition for your business. No one is going to want to buy something that anyone can do. What your company does, does not have to be unique. However, it does have to be special. Your employees can make it special, if they are up to the challenges placed in front of them. Try saying things like, "It may not have been easy, but we can all be proud of how much we have grown," or "let me show you what I think is possible." Build something for the future, and it will have greater value when you go to sell it.

Looking for a good book? Why not try, *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader; Becoming the Person Others Will Want to Follow*, by John C. Maxwell.

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