



By: Bill Sanders

The best growth strategy in the world is useless if it isn't properly implemented. The ever increasing speed of change along with the deluge of information broadcast at us daily entices even the most disciplined of business owners to focus on the urgent at the expense of the important. To prevent that, there are three things that every small business owner can do to radically increase their success in pursuing profitable growth:

1. Cultivate and maintain an external perspective to stay focused on working "on" the business in addition to working "in" the business.
2. Create the support systems that allow the owner time and space to listen and realign operations to meet objectives
3. Understand and deploy the three key implementation principles that align operational processes to business strategy.

I define operational strategy as

“The integrated design, maintenance, and innovation of the processes, procedures, and tools that drive an organization’s production.”

Cultivate and Maintaining an External Perspective

There is a huge difference between working “in” the business and working “on” the business. Most business owners are great at working “in” the business. After all, they are usually experts in their field or they wouldn’t have started the business in the first place.

Starting out, an owner can hire a few employees, set up a few new systems, and the business is underway. Growth, however, creates new demands, requires additional hires, and necessitates new systems to handle the business.

Paying attention to those systems, (the processes, procedures, and tools), and identifying when and what needs changing is at the heart of operational strategy. Most business owners get caught up in the day-to-day issues of producing their products and or delivering their services. To avoid this, business owners need to cultivate and maintain an external perspective.

There are multiple ways of doing this. Here are three:

1. Set up an advisory board. This board should be between four and eight people, not including the business owner. It should be a diverse group of individuals trusted by the business owner to put the business first and hold the owner accountable to commitments made. Quarterly meetings by teleconference or in person can be sufficient.
2. Hire a business coach or consultant. The best candidates are process oriented with wide experience across multiple industries. Their work and experience will bring a wider purview of both the business and of potential solutions and innovations.
3. Hold quarterly off-sites for the management team if the organization is large enough to have one. The purpose of the off-site is to remove everyone from the day-to-day execution long enough to shift their headspace to thinking about working on the business. Monthly or even bi-weekly meetings should be held to gauge implementation progress between the off-sites. If the business isn’t large enough to have a management team, hold the off-site alone or with a trusted advisor.

An owner can use these methods independently, or better yet, deploy all of them for the widest variety of support in preparing the business for growth.

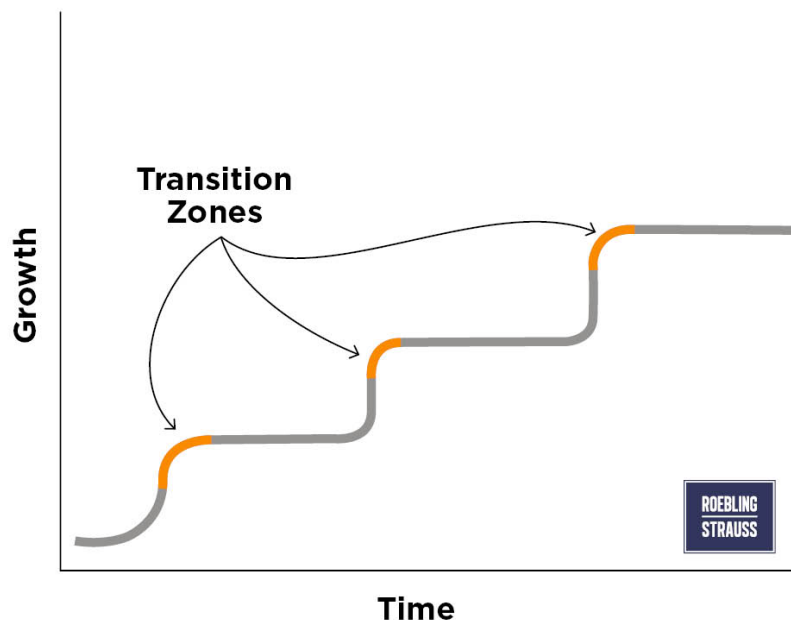
Create Support Systems

Now that an external perspective is present and decisions are being made on how and when to expand capacity, the owner needs support systems that allow the time and investment to insure the business is implementing those changes in a timely manner.

These support systems come in many forms, but ultimately solve for the following issues:

- Receiving rapid communications from the front lines on what customer needs are changing and what competitors are offering
- Maintaining the physical and emotional health of the owner
- Growing a healthy, responsive culture inside the business
- Investment and project management of the changes required
- Rapidly identifying skill gaps and transition periods

Typical growth patterns usually take the following form:



At each new phase of growth, there is a transition zone where the entire enterprise has to change and then integrate a new way of working. This expansion of capacity is followed by a period of consolidation and growth until new processes, procedures, and tools are required to continue the growth cycle.

Deploying Key Implementation Principles

There are three key implementation principles that will assist the owner in both communicating and implementing the changes necessary.

1. Establish a Common Trajectory – The staff and management need to understand the need for change, the inevitability of growing pains, and perhaps most importantly, what's in it for them. Communication of the why, the how, and the speed at which change is expected is crucial.

2. Secure Explicit Agreement – In any endeavor, it is critical to make requests and secure commitments for the work that needs to be done to meet the objectives. It should be documented in terms of the 4Ws: Who will do What, for Whom, by When. The process is the person making the request (Whom) defines the quality criteria of the What to the extent that anyone can tell if that quality criteria has been met. They then ask someone (Who) when they can commit to delivering the What. That date becomes the When in this equation.
3. Ensure Transparent Accountability – Execution is critical and accountability drives performance. Having a way to monitor and track results transparently is key in developing a culture of accountability. When anyone involved in the project can see at anytime how well everyone else is keeping their commitments, everyone begins taking their commitments more seriously.

This only works however if the “First Contact” principle is applied. Often paraphrased as “No battle plan survives first contact with the enemy,” what Helmuth von Moltke the Elder actually wrote in 1871 was:

***“No plan of operations extends with any certainty
beyond the first contact with the main hostile force.”***

Applying the “First Contact” principle means understanding that the whole purpose of these three implementation principles is to provide clarity, increase commitment, and provide early warning when commitments can’t be kept. In other words, expect results, but also expect changes and reward early warning when things are not going to plan. Never shoot the messenger.

Plenty of small and medium size business owners are frustrated with their lack of growth. Regardless of how much harder they work, they find themselves overworked beyond capacity, stressed out, and frustrated at the time and attention the day-to-day execution requires.

For these owners, cultivating and maintaining an external perspective, creating support systems, and deploying key implementing principles can make the difference between owning a thriving, growing business and being chained to a struggling business that owns them.

Bill Sanders is the founder of Roebling Strauss, Inc. and one of the best Operational Strategists in the business. Bill has the rare ability to efficiently identify misalignment between strategy, process, and execution, and design elegant solutions to these often highly complex problems. His insights routinely expose new business opportunities and underutilized team talents, unlocking increased profitability and business growth. Bill’s clients range from independently owned agencies and SMEs to members of the Fortune 500. He is a former president of the San Francisco American Marketing Association, and writes a regular column on work culture for the Huffington Post.