

SMALL BUSINESS SUCCESS



July 2009

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How's Your Alignment?

The Connection Between Stress and Life Alignment

Janet ran a successful business. Her small jewelry and handbag boutique had grown from a one-woman show in a small hole-in-the-wall downtown storefront to a bustling busy mall location with ten employees. She was making more than she had ever imagined, had a wonderful staff, and a store that was busy all the time. Her product line had expanded to include exotic accessories from all over Europe and her store had a loyal, regular clientele with ongoing referrals. Her success had allowed her to purchase a high-end executive condominium and the car of her dreams. She took several vacations to exotic locations each year, in addition to buying trips all over the world. To look at Janet, you'd think she had life by the tail. Everyone knew she was at the pinnacle of success. But strange things were happening to her. She had developed a stomachache that wouldn't go away. She was tired all the time, and had a hard time matching her energy with the demands of her staff and her store. She couldn't sleep and got weird headaches and blurred vision. Her constant ill health created a sense of anxiety, and she found it difficult to be around people.

Janet visited her doctor, who did all kinds of tests – all of which came back negative. There seemed to be no physical reason for her to be feeling so poorly, yet her symptoms persisted and even worsened over the weeks. Thinking perhaps she was going crazy, she visited a psychologist who began exploring whether there might be other reasons for what she was going through. It was through the process of looking at her activities, her values, and her life's desires that Janet discovered her life was completely out of alignment. This misalignment between what she truly wanted out of life, and the life she was currently living, had created stress, which manifested itself in the physical symptoms she was experiencing.

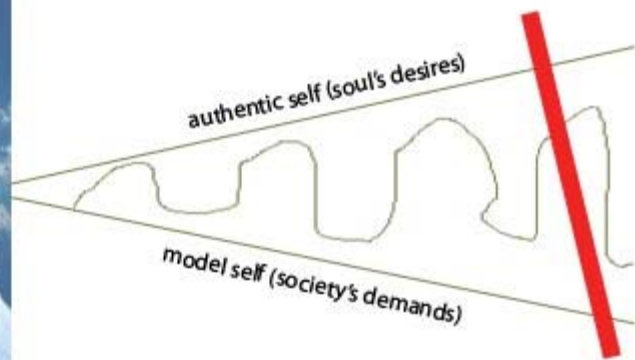
Janet is not alone. Many small business owners end up where she was because they don't realize that the path they are taking is moving them away from their authentic selves, and this causes stress – in many cases extreme stress – that shows itself in physical ways. Janet was

ecstatic with her first little shop downtown. She loved the personal touch she could offer each customer when they were in her store. She didn't mind that the aisles were crowded, that people sometimes had to wait to come in because there wasn't enough room in the store, and that she often had to stay open late because people wandered in just at closing time. She loved the relationships she developed with repeat customers and knew most of them by name.

When she faced the decision of whether to move into a larger location away from downtown, it seemed like the smart and prudent thing to do – respond to business growth. But what that did was take her farther and farther away from the part of her business that she loved – creating a wonderful experience for her customers. Now, that was up to her staff and she spent almost all her time in the office, taking care of business, ordering new stock, creating marketing plans, handling budgets and HR issues, and going on buying trips – and she hated traveling! In her success, she had lost a connection to her authentic self – the woman that first opened that tiny business and knew her customers by name.

Jim Reger, author, motivational speaker, and leadership expert demonstrates this in the following diagram.

Each of us is born with what Reger calls our authentic selves. It is all the things that make us truly unique in the world – our personalities, gifts and desires. But at



the same time, we are born into a world that has expectations of us. Family expectations, expectations in school, with peers, and eventually at work. He calls this our model self. Often those two things, rather than running parallel, end up running in different directions, and we spend our lives moving back and forth - trying to be true to who we are, and also trying to fit in to what society expects from us. If we stay too close to our authentic selves, but don't fit in with our culture (in Janet's case, her work culture), it creates stress. If we constantly give in to the demands of our culture but sacrifice our authentic selves, this also causes stress. At some point, the disconnect between our authentic selves and society's demands causes what Reger calls a "red line" event. For some it's a heart attack, stroke, cancer, or depression. For Janet, it was hitting the wall physically.

For most people, hitting the red line causes a serious re-evaluation of what is important in life. It causes them to look at their values, their true deep desires, and the things that they do (or don't do) that make a difference in the world. Those who don't stop and pay attention to the red line events, often end up with dire consequences – a complete physical or mental breakdown, or life-threatening illness.

Once Janet made this connection, she was able to make some radical changes. She sold her business for a large sum of money. She gave a third to charity, put a third into investments for her retirement, and used the final third to find a hole-in-the-wall downtown storefront to start a

new business selling art from little-known local artists. She sold her fancy condo and bought a small townhouse that met her needs, and even sold her car and bought a hybrid she felt good about driving. She aligned her life closer to her authentic self, and now, she again knows her customers' names. She goes home at night and sleeps well because she loves what she's doing. And she's learned from her mistakes and won't veer from her path of alignment again.

If any part of Janet's story rings true for you, take a look at how far apart your authentic self (that part of you that tells you who you really are and what you really want to do) and your model self (that part that gives in to the demands around you) are. Are you dangerously close to approaching a red line event in your life? Are you doing what really makes you happy? Do you feel you are living a life that is true to who you are? If the answer to any of these questions is "no", it's time to take a step back and look at things through a different lens.

Where can you create greater alignment between what you do and who you are? If that's not possible in your business right now, or ever for that matter, is it time to move on and take a different path? If your life is out of alignment, you will not be experiencing joy or fulfillment in your work – no matter how successful your business is. And isn't life too short to live so much of your time doing something that isn't aligned with your authentic self?

Diagram from "The Authentic Leader – It's About Presence, Not Position" co-authored by Jim Reger and David Irvine, and used with permission from Jim Reger of The Reger Group in Victoria, BC.

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Website Wanderlust

Tips to Ensure Your Next Web Designer is a Good Fit for Your Business

In this age of wisdom and technology, a web site is an absolute necessity for doing business. In fact, many people wouldn't even consider you a credible business if you don't have one. And even businesses that don't sell much online, require a website so people can check them out before they come into the store. Unfortunately, having a website designed is still a large expense for most small businesses, and website technology changes so rapidly that almost by the time you get it built, something new has come out that could make it better, faster, more friendly, and easier to optimize. Web design companies are also prolific. Look in any Yellow Pages directory and you'll find dozens to choose from, all offering the moon and guaranteed success for your business. So what's a small business to do? If you're ready to create your first business website, or if your existing one has finally reached obsolescence and needs an overhaul, here are some tips to make sure you get the right design company for your business.

Check their portfolio. If they are a reputable company, they should have an online or print portfolio of the websites they have created. Every company has its own style, so looking through their work will give you a sense of whether you like their work and their style suits what you have in mind for your website. You'll be able to find a mismatch pretty quickly. If they don't have anything to show you, say thank you, and move on.

Clarify EVERYTHING on the estimate. Educate yourself on your needs for your specific business. Ask for a detailed estimate in writing, and clarify each point in the estimate. Don't assume that your interpretation is the same as theirs. Website Optimization will most certainly be part of what they promise, but you need to find out exactly what that means to them. Talk to someone who knows about search engine optimization so you can speak intelligently with the designer and won't be baffled by a language you don't understand. Also, don't accept estimates that say "depends on . . ." unless you know where in the cost range you're going to land based on what you need, and you understand the "depends on" terms.

Ask about additional costs. A website is a living breathing thing, and sometimes you don't really know what you're missing until you've lived with it for a little while. For example, after multiple customer requests you realize you should have included Paypal as a payment option in your checkout. Because you're already committed to your website, the design company can charge for these additional items, which you may not have expected. Make sure you ask specifically what additional changes will cost after the website has been built. It stands to reason that they can't do it for free, but you should know up front what those costs will be before you begin. Get this in writing.

Beware of huge promises. It's a website after all – granted, an extremely important part of your business and a great tool – but it's not going to triple your profits in a week. If your web designer is making promises that seem too good to be true, they probably are.



Trust your instincts. Just like with anything else, you'll know whether you're dealing with someone you think you can trust. If you're getting that "I'm not sure about this guy" feeling, it's probably a good indicator that he's not a good fit for you – even if he has come highly recommended. You're the one who needs to work with him and you need to be comfortable with that relationship. Website creation can be stressful. It's a lengthy complicated process and sometimes what the designer thinks is best contrasts what you think is best. You know your business, but they know websites, so in order to iron out those clashes, give and take is required to come up with a product that is the best it can be. In order to do this there needs to be a high level of trust in your relationship with the designer.

Don't decide based on price alone. Sure, price is a factor in every decision you make in your small business, but don't make the mistake of assuming the cheapest price will get you what you need. By the same token, neither will the highest price. Decide what you can realistically afford, and talk to a company about what they will offer in that price range. You may need to bump up what you're willing to spend, or reduce your expectations of what you can get for the money you have. It needs to work for you and most of the time, somewhere in a mid-range price you'll

find a fair product for a fair price. Shop around. You'll find huge differences between what companies have to offer. Just like with anything else, you may be able to negotiate a deal with someone you really like who's willing to match a competitor's price to get your business.

Purchasing a web site design is a big decision, and the reason many small businesses have bad experiences is because they don't know enough about what they want and need, and don't understand the language the design company speaks. The best thing you can do is be very clear about what your business needs in a website, and find out as much as you can about the design business. If you speak the same language there will be less chance of misunderstanding and greater clarity in the process. You'll both be happy with the end result.

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Desk Bound

Maintaining Your Health While Sitting at a Desk All Day

It's no secret that many of us spend large portions of our day sitting. We sit as we drive to work, sit in front of our computers for 8 hours, sit while driving home, and then sit in front of the television for another few hours. In general, sitting for too long contributes to all kinds of ill health. A study in the International Journal of Obesity and Related Metabolic Disorders found that those who had high daily levels of sitting (7.4 hours or more) were significantly more likely to be overweight or obese than those who reported low daily sitting levels (less than 4.7 hours a day). Sitting at a desk all day also puts you at risk of back pain, neck and shoulder pain (particularly if you sit with poor posture), leg cramps, tense muscles, and increased chance of blood clots. While the hazards of prolonged sitting may be obvious, many of us don't have a choice and must work at a desk, at least for a portion, if not most of our day. There are some things you can do to minimize the damage that sitting all day can do to your body. Take advantage of some of these ideas and create a healthier work environment, even if your job requires a lot of sitting.

Keep your body in a neutral position

This means that your joints are naturally aligned, reducing your risk of stress and strain on the muscles, tendons, and your skeletal system. To achieve a neutral body position:

- Adjust your chair so your thighs are parallel with the floor
- Choose a well-padded chair that supports your back and has lumbar support (or invest in a lumbar support cushion or chair pad – it will more than repay you for your investment with improved back health)
- Your hands, wrists and forearms should be in-line and roughly parallel to the floor.
- Your elbows should be close to your body, bent at a 90- to 120-degree angle

- Your feet should be flat on the floor or supported by a footrest

Move it or lose it

There's an old saying that your mind can only retain as much as your bottom can endure. It's true that as soon as our bodies feel discomfort, we are less productive as we become pre-occupied with the discomfort. Your body can only tolerate being in one position for about 20 minutes before it starts to feel uncomfortable. The longer you remain in an uncomfortable position, the more tense your muscles get, and eventually they will revolt. Unfortunately, we've taught our minds to override that discomfort, and often barely notice the messages our bodies try to send us. I would sometimes spend several hours without moving any part of my body but my hand on the mouse. It was a wake-up call when I started getting numbness and pins and needles in my neck and down my arm and ended up with so much neck and shoulder pain it took several months of physiotherapy to get back to normal. Combat this syndrome by moving about every 15 minutes. Stand, stretch, walk around or change your position for at least 30 seconds. If you're the type that tends to forget, set an alarm on your computer to go off at least every half hour to remind you to get up and move.



Walk instead of using the phone

When you need to speak to a co-worker, rather than picking up the phone, take a few minutes to walk to their office and talk to them in person. Stand while you're having the conversation. Take the long way back to your desk. Heck, even walk up and down a flight or two of stairs to get your heart rate up a couple of times in the day. If you have to leave the office to drive to meetings – park a block farther away so that you can build some walking into your day. Or walk to meetings that are close enough to your office. It may take a few extra minutes, but the time you spend getting a bit of exercise will more than be made up by the increase in overall productivity you'll achieve by getting your body moving.

Reduce repetitive movements

Movements that you repeat over and over (such as answering the phone or using your computer mouse) can lead to strains and stress on your body, resulting in things like Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, neck and back strain, and tense muscles and/or muscle spasm. Keeping items you use often within arm's reach and using tools, such as a phone headset to reduce repetitive movements can help to reduce repetitive strain injuries.

Avoid monitor madness

Staring at your monitor for hours on end can result in all kinds of stresses and strains – from your eyes to your neck and back. Keep your computer monitor directly in front of you and at least 20 inches away. The top of the screen should be at or below your eye level, and it should be perpendicular to the window (to reduce glare). Look away from your computer screen often

to avoid dry eyes and eye fatigue. Take a few minutes to look out your window, or simply close your eyes and give them a rest several times a day.

Be purposeful about your eating during the day

It's easy to just grab something and eat lunch at your desk while you work but the consequences are great. You're contributing to the already sedentary job you have, and you're less conscious of what you eat. Don't keep junk food at your desk. The temptation to snack is too high, and the result is feeling sluggish, tired and unfocused. So make it a habit to have lunch away from your desk. Even if it's just walking down the hall to the lunch room. Better yet, get outside and go for a half hour walk to clear your head and exercise your body. If you're a snacker, keep a supply of healthy snacks nearby so you're not adding empty calories to your daily consumption.

See your chiropractor or physiotherapist or massage therapist regularly

If you work at a computer most of the day, there is no question you will, over time, build up tension in your neck and back. Regular visits to your favourite health practitioner to deal with those tense muscles will improve your overall health, and prevent more serious illnesses with long term implications.

You may not be able to change what is required of you on a day-to-day basis in terms of sitting at your desk, but you can make changes to how you do those things. They may seem small, but each little change you make adds up to a large impact at the end of a day, a week, and a year.

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REAP the Benefits of Referrals

Referrals – one of the most highly effective methods of marketing - is also one of most underused. Getting referrals from your clients and customers can be an extremely effective way to increase your customer base and increase your sales. So why don't more businesses have a plan in place to gain referrals on a regular basis? There is a fear that asking for referrals is pushy and will turn people off. But think about it, when you've received excellent service, don't you want to tell your friends about it? Don't you want them to benefit from the quality of service you've received? If your service is exceptional (and it is, isn't it?) you should have no fear of asking your customers to give you the opportunity to provide the same service to their friends and family. Here are a few steps you might want to consider for successfully gathering referrals.

Reduce fear in customers

In order to reduce your own fear of asking for referrals, work to reduce fear in your customers. Assure them that you will not be stalking their friends and family if they provide you with their names. Assure them that you will be respectful in the sales process. If you've built a relationship with your customers based on trust and integrity, their apprehension, if they have any, will likely be diminished quickly with your assurances.

Educate your customers

Tell your customers how you will use the names they provide. Will you be sending them an invitation to an open house? Will you be offering them a first-purchase discount? Will you be telephoning them and requesting a meeting? Being specific with your customers not only diminishes their fear, but also lets them come up with more qualified leads. Maybe Aunt May would love the idea of an open house, but Cousin Joe would respond better to a discount offer. Let your customers know your motives behind your request for referrals. “We’re so glad you’re happy with, we would love to give your friends the opportunity to enjoy it too. Would you be willing to give us a referral?” Educating your customers about why and how you will deal with the referrals they give you makes it more comfortable for them to hand over those names.

Ask for referrals

Once you’ve done your homework, don’t forget the important step of actually asking for the referral. Many people chicken out at this point. They work to reduce fear, educate their customers, but fall short of actually asking for the names. Be specific – how many names would you like? Can you offer something to your customer to show your appreciation for their willingness to give their referrals? For some this a motivator. For others, the good service you’ve provided is enough.



Prove yourself to both the referred customer and the one who gave you the referral

Once you’ve received the referral, make sure you capitalize on it. You may only have one chance to make an impression, and the way you treat the referral not only affects your potential relationship with that customer, but may also affect your future relationship with the client who gave you the referral. If you don’t WOW Aunt May with your service, your customer will hear about it. After all, Aunt May went on their word! A referral gone bad is an embarrassment to the person who made it, and your customer may think twice before using you again, even if they have been a loyal customer. Your customer’s referral is a precious commodity so treat it with care. Make sure you exceed expectations.

Referrals are a fabulous way to increase sales and expand your customer base, but they are also a huge responsibility. Your customers’ reputations are on the line, and you can be assured if you blow it with their referral, more people will hear about it. Take referrals seriously, treat them with the care and respect they deserve, and you will reap the benefits for your business.

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Staying on Top

4 Strategies for Keeping Your Business Strong in Lean Times

The jury is still out on what we can expect economically in the coming months. Some economists are confident that the worst is over, and that we will see a slow but gradual return of a healthy economy. They advise that businesses take a cautious but confident move forward, increase marketing and advertising and anticipate consumers will respond. Others are saying we are still headed for the worst and that businesses should now be looking at how

to survive an even greater crisis than the one we have just been through. Both sides have equally intelligent, learned, scholarly men and women looking at the same circumstances – and coming to very different conclusions. It's a little frustrating for the small business owner, and can create a great deal of uncertainty as to how to proceed in running their businesses. Anticipate growth, or cut back? The real answer is that we don't really know. No one's crystal ball is accurate, so the best we can do is strategize for success in ways that will strengthen our businesses to cope with whatever happens. These strategies are universal, and regardless of which way the economic wind blows, your business will be stronger if you apply these principles now.

Build strong staff relationships

Entrepreneurs tend to be lone rangers. They keep things to themselves, don't share their concerns, and try to fix everything themselves. In difficult times, this is the wrong attitude, and one that can be deadly. Your employees are your allies, and not inviting them in to the process is a mistake. Chances are, your staff is as uncertain as you are; maybe even more. They want to know the reality of what's going on with your business. Susan Heron, CEO of the Australian Institute of Management says, "You can't fool staff. The staff will know. They have all the evidence of the downturn around them. They see it in their lives, they see it in the media, they see it if the business is faltering." Your best strategy for surviving what lies ahead is developing a dynamic, loyal team. If you have strong relationships with your employees through demonstrating honesty, integrity, and a genuine concern for them, they will go to the moon for you. They will work longer hours, they will be willing to make sacrifices, they will want to help you succeed, and do whatever it takes to do so. If you don't pay attention to their concerns, if you lie or are less than honest about what's going on, as Heron says, they will know. Trust will be eroded and you will not be able to depend on them when difficult decisions need to be made. If things go well in the future and your business prospers, they'll be there to take you to the next level. If they don't and you are facing difficult times, they'll join hands, put their heads down and do what it takes to get through it.

Practice thinking outside the business box

In uncertain times, creativity is king. Companies who come up with smart, innovative ways to do business will succeed because they were willing to make unconventional choices that worked for them. Being creative with the staff and budget you have can literally save your business. Four day weeks, job sharing, competitive collaboration, reciprocal alliances, interactive customer strategies, word of mouth marketing, eco-friendly practices, all are examples of creative strategies used by businesses to weather lean times. Decide what you need to accomplish. Take stock of your staff strengths and capacity. Review your budget and resources. Then sit down with a mentor, another business owner, your staff, and brainstorm how you can accomplish those things with the resources you have. Be willing to walk away from how you've always done something and embrace a completely different



way. You'll be amazed at how creatively you can accomplish your goals without sacrificing your bottom line. This practice will be most beneficial when you're faced with making difficult decisions down the road.



Build bridges with customers and suppliers

It is extremely important to develop and maintain positive, strong relationships with your customers and suppliers. In fact, this should be one of your most important business strategies, because in lean times, you may need to count on those relationships to help you get through. With your suppliers, do you demonstrate openness and integrity in all your business dealings? Do you pay your bills on time? Do you develop a rapport that moves you beyond simply placing orders? Do your suppliers like you? Are you easy to deal with? If the answers to these questions are yes, you will probably be able to count on them to work with you if you do run into a cash flow crunch, or difficulty down the road. With your customers, do you follow through on your promises? Do you make them feel like they are the most important people in the world to you? Do you honour your word, offer honest fair prices, treat them with respect and kindness? Do you provide the best product or service you possibly can? If yes, you can depend on them to be forgiving when you make mistakes, be willing to pay fair price for fair service or product, tell others about you, and work with you when you need them to.

Make retention a priority

We've come full circle in a way. We began with your staff, and we're going to end there as well. You want to have the best people on board, regardless of what happens in the future, to achieve business success. To retain the best people, you need to make them feel valued. In lean times it's more difficult to offer bonuses or other direct financial benefits you may have at your disposal when things are going well, but it doesn't take much to make someone feel they are important. An informal staff get-together occasionally to build morale doesn't have to cost a lot. Host a barbeque and pot luck and you supply the wine. Send hand-written thank you notes to each member on your team letting them know how you see them contributing to your business success. Alternate a paid day off for each employee, "just because". Post significant employee achievements or successes on a bulletin board where other employees will see it. Give lots of verbal kudos when they do something well. Spend one hour each week or twice a month doing teambuilding activities that build morale and foster teamwork. These retention strategies don't cost you much but time, but they net a huge return on your investment in loyalty, and a staff who wants to work for YOU. In lean times, that loyalty will be your greatest asset.

Regardless of which side correctly predicts the economic outcome in the coming months, using these strategies to strengthen your business will help you be prepared to handle whatever comes.

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