

The astronaut, the train driver, and the sniper

Vision thinking

Do you remember when you were a child and people asked you what you were going to do when you grow up? If you were a precocious little snot like me, you probably said something like what I said, “An astronaut, a train driver and a sniper”.

There was no challenge in my mind with being all three (at the same time, mind you!), but then the world, the education system and my parents all got on board, and so, fifteen years later, I was an electrician instead. Looking back I really wondered, “What the hell happened?”

If you think about it, it's pretty obvious that our world isn't set up for people with 'shallow' knowledge, no matter how broad. Our world wants people with 'deep' knowledge and deep knowledge

requires specialisation. So we become the proverbial ‘inch wide and a mile deep’, and that’s great *if* you are happy to be an employee— but if you are going to be a business owner, this level of specialisation is a nightmare.

Ask yourself how many people you know right now that can or could run a successful business? Not just be self-employed (i.e. ‘owning a job’), but actually owning and running a business that gives them the lifestyle they want... got a number in mind? What percentage of the population would they make up? 10%? Less? Maybe your answer is less than 5%? Keep going, and I think you’ll find that the real answer is somewhere south of 1%. That’s right! Less than 1 in 100 people can or could run a successful business! Is it any wonder that our education and support systems are set up to train the other 99%?

So, I ended up—just like most of you reading this book—as a technician. I was a great technician because I’d had lots of training and lots of experience. I knew what to do, and I knew how to do it. To paraphrase Jerry Seinfeld, “I had the tools; I was in the union.”

But, there’s a problem when this highly skilled and experienced technician moves into a management role, or becomes a business owner. Because of their technical excellence, technicians become more interested, more involved, and more determined as the detail becomes more important. Metres are more important than kilometres, millimetres are more important than metres and microns are more important than millimetres. As we look closer and closer at the detail, we lose the big picture; we see trees and not forests, so we work **IN** our businesses and not **ON** them.

Don't you just love hearing well-meaning friends and family say that you have to work *on* your business, not *in* it? "You have to work smarter, not harder!" It sounds practical and important, but do they ever explain to you what it actually means, or do they just say it as an all-encompassing, general explanation of why you are busting your gut and getting nowhere?

Transitioning from technician to manager is the toughest gig in business, but it has to happen before you can start working *on* your business. One of my Japanese accounting colleagues explained it to me this way, "A technician becomes more interested the further we move to the right of the decimal place, but a manager has to become more interested the further we move to the left of the decimal place."

As a technician who wants to transition into a manager, you'll need to win this game, or you'll always be stuck working *in* your business.

Transitioning from technician to manager

To manage your business effectively, you have to 'think bigger picture'. In order to 'think bigger picture', you'll need to get further away from the problem to see it in perspective. For example, in a production environment (remember my background...) the line worker is thinking about the work right now, the rest of today and possibly tomorrow. After that, it's the weekend and holidays. The first level supervisor is thinking about today and the rest of the week, and possibly a little of next week. The leading hand is thinking about this week, this month, and the month after that. The production manager is thinking about

this month, this quarter, the rest of the year, and possibly a little of next year. The general manager is thinking about this quarter, the rest of this year and the next three years, while the managing director (and the board) is thinking about this year, the next three years, and the next generation.

The rub is that when you are a sole trader, you have to do it all yourself, and you have to do it all the time.

But, it's a really tough ask to expect anyone to do all that successfully *and* sustain it over a long period of time.

So, being good technicians, we fall into the trap of not getting beyond the current BAS period and the most important work; 'big picture planning' does not get done. We only have time for the urgent work.

To get out of this trap, we have to think outside of our box. It's not impossible (although it may feel that way), but we do have to distance ourselves (both mentally and physically) so that we can see more of the challenges. We have to become a 'mile wide and an inch deep'. We have to reinvent ourselves, and that is not an exercise for the faint-of-heart.

The physical separation is crucially important. As business owners, we are always working (fortunately, we do not always have to be at work in order to be working, but even so, in our heads we are always working). To get this new perspective, it is essential that we get right away from our place of work, from our phones and from all our other connections, so that we can literally 'stare at the sunset'. Actually, it's not such a bad gig when you think of it that way.

For me, this works best when I'm with like-minded people who have the same objective. All sorts of professional development seminars fit this bill. I suggest looking for one that has at least one night away, that is too far to come home from (so you are forced to stay overnight), and that has speakers who might genuinely have something interesting to say. Actually, this last is the least important, because it is the experience rather than the content that will make the difference.

If you are the type of person who likes to take notes, then knock yourself out. However I'm not so interested in the content, and if I can get one or two takeaways from each event then that's enough for me (and I can remember one or two things without writing them down). The objective is to think outside the square and get out of your comfort zone. Take advantage of every break. Talk to people you don't already know. Ask people what their biggest business challenges are—and try to help them. You'll be amazed at how clever you are, and how grateful they are for your assistance.

The next step for the technician/manager is to apply the knowledge gained—and that can't be done if your current role is 100% hands-on. One of the defining characteristics of someone caught in the technician's trap is that they are time-poor, I am constantly asked about time management and associated training programs, but the truth is that we cannot (and therefore should not try to) manage time. All we can really do is manage how we work, what we work on and to what level (you'll learn more about my approach to this in the Chapter entitled *The whirlpool in the river on page 141*).

Taking control and creating change

The first step towards becoming in control is to work out some basic truths:

- What do you want your business to look like at a future point in time (e.g. financials, organisational chart.)?
- What indicators will show that you have arrived?
- What will be your business story at that point?
- What will you do, and (more importantly) what *won't* you do?
- What are you *really* working on?
- Should your business be doing that?
- Should your business be doing it *now*?

Let's look at an average 'technician-masquerading-as- business-owner'. We'll call him Jim, but you may recognise yourself in him when I tell you his story.

Jim was a client who owned a well-known franchise, and I'd already been working with him for a couple of months. We'd talked about time management, big picture, and the 'important vs. urgent' approach to time management.

The next time we spoke, he said, "It doesn't work."

When I asked him to explain further, he said that his usual four jobs the previous day had not been possible because— even though he'd followed my system— he still didn't have enough time in the day to get his work finished.

Apparently, Jim's day went this way. When he'd come out in the morning, one of the tyres on his van was flat, so he decided that fixing the tyre was important *and* urgent, so it had to be done right away. After a quick repair, he set off to his first job of the day.

On his way to that job, he drove past his motor mechanic's workshop, so he decided to drop off the flat spare tyre (because it's risky to drive around with a flat spare). His mechanic said, "Wait fifteen minutes, and you can take it with you."

Jim decided that it would take more than fifteen minutes to come back later, so he agrees to wait.

Forty-five minutes later he is finally back on the road, but as soon as he drives off, his wife calls and says, "I have a problem with (insert typical household problem). I need you to come home to take care of it."

So, he makes a quick trip home, spends another forty-five minutes or so fixing the problem— and he has just lost half a day.

Jim was adamant that he had followed my system exactly, and couldn't see how he could have done it any other way (without serious relationship consequences). Can you see Jim's problem? Can you see where he made the decision to prioritise a non-urgent matter over his scheduled work?

Hopefully you've worked out that he fell over when he decided to drop off the spare tyre. Yes, there's a risk in driving around with a flat spare—but can you remember the last time you had even one flat tyre, let alone two in the same day?

Had he prioritised his work over the flat spare, he would have completed at least three of the jobs and possibly all four.

So, with a plan of what to do and a little extra time to get it done, all that remains is the will to change what you're actually doing. This is the final, and in many cases the biggest, hurdle for the brilliant technician. Insanity was once defined as, "Repeating the same actions and expecting a different outcome." The truth is, if you want a different outcome in your business or your life, you are going to have to change your inputs, and that means you have to change how you react to circumstances.

If you need to, start small. Change the environment that you work in; change the colours, the orientation of your desk, the way you drive to work or how you arrange your toolbox. Then challenge your own skills. Ask yourself, "What else can I learn?", but don't fuss about its relevance (it's ALL relevant, eventually)!

Once you've implemented small changes and started learning new things, you will start to think about what you believe to be 'true'— and that's a matter of perspective, right? All of this will lead you to asking better questions, and that leads to better answers... and on to better actions.

Creating a vision

We can all see the things we want to avoid, but picturing the things we want to pursue is far harder. That's why Jim's story is so important. When you read about Jim, you might have thought back on your past week, or even just a single day, where you fell into the same trap.

You fell into the trap of confusing the things you needed to do with the things that seemed really important and urgent at that time, because your vision of what you *ought to be doing* in that hour was not clear in your mind, so it didn't give you any guidance.

If Jim had a clear picture in his mind of where his business was heading (financial, staff, systems, schedule ...) and had worked that into a clear pathway from where he was that morning to where he wanted to end up, the warning bell would have rung in his head as soon as he passed the mechanic's workshop. When he said to himself, "It will only take five minutes to drop off the tyre", he should have instantly responded with, "I need to be at my first job in fifteen minutes if I want to finish four jobs today and make \$X."

If he had sat down and worked out all the indicators and targets he had to meet that very week to keep him on track for achieving his longer-term goal, the conversation would have been finished before it began— and so would his conversation with his wife.

If Jim (and you) had taken the time to think through the basic truths I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, he would have known what and what not to do; he would have easily been able to identify what he really needed to work on, what he should be doing right now, and so on.

All this leads unerringly toward a better lifestyle! From better ideas and information to better questions and answers helping you to make better decisions and take better actions.