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Developing the E-Team: A Key to Growth in Small Firms

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DEVELOPING THE E-TEAM: A KEY TO GROWTH IN SMALL FIRMS

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the challenges facing small business owner-managers (entrepreneurs) who are seeking growth in their firms. It examines the cycle of growth in the small firm and argues that successful growth requires the development of an entrepreneurial team – the E-Team – who can work with the entrepreneur and eventually take over responsibility for the businesses. The paper suggests that team building and coaching are likely to be key elements of how successfully the firm develops this E-Team. Coaching techniques and lessons from successful entrepreneurs are highlighted.

Key words: small business, human resource management, team building, coaching.

INTRODUCTION

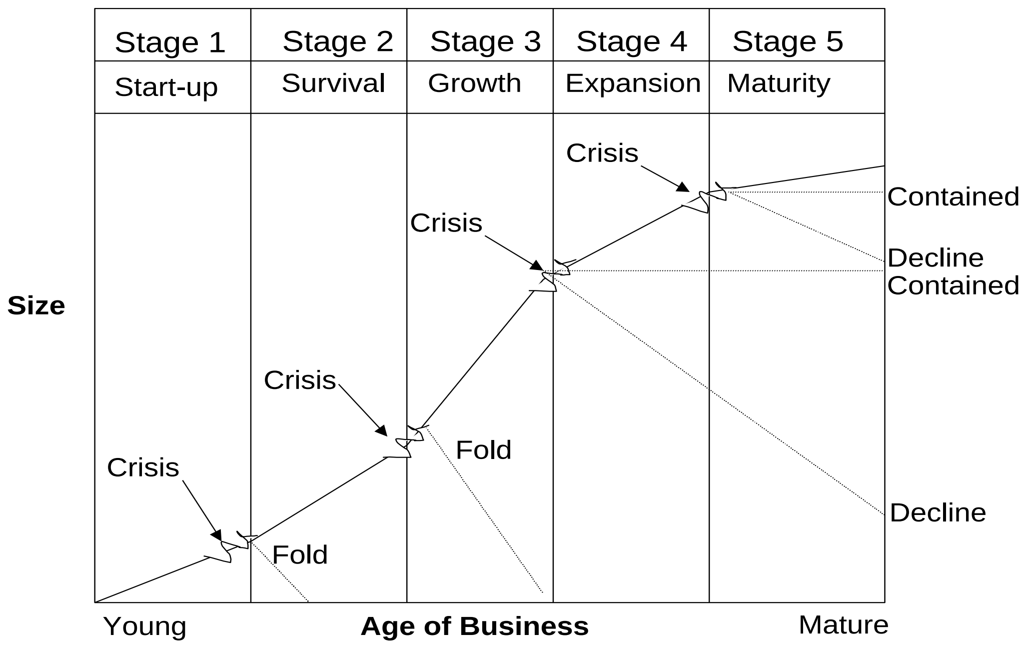
The small business sector in is frequently viewed as the crucible from which entrepreneurs can emerge. Like many countries Australia has a large proportion of its total non-farm businesses that are small to medium enterprises (SMEs). Of the nearly one million registered firms operating in Australia just over 90% are SMEs. The majority of these are micro businesses (<5 employees). Such firms frequently have only one employee - the owner-manager - and may produce only sufficient income to support this person and their family. In terms of employment generation the SME sector is viewed as a major source of jobs. In Australia, SMEs account for about half the total employment in the non-agricultural sector (ABS 2000).

The capacity of a small firm to grow into a large one is dependent on many things, but one of the most critical is the ability of the owner-manager to learn how to think and act strategically, build capability and delegate responsibilities. Key factors influencing the creation and growth of new business ventures include the ability of the owner-manager or entrepreneur to recognise opportunities, offer leadership and creativity, marshal resources (e.g. time, money and intellectual property), create an adequate 'fit and balance' between the resources available and the demands being placed upon them, and the ability to take an integrated and holistic approach to the business (Timmons 1999). Whatever their capabilities few entrepreneurs can successfully grow a business without creating a dynamic team of people who can provide support and permit the entrepreneur to follow new growth opportunities.

This paper examines the importance of delegation, team building and coaching within the small firm. It considers the challenges facing the owner-managers of small firms seeking to successfully grow their businesses, and provides suggestions for how to delegate and coach so as to create a winning entrepreneurial team an "E-Team".

THE GROWTH CYCLE OF SMALL FIRMS

Research into the growth cycle of small firms has indicated a series of 'stage-models' in which the business moves through a number of defined stages as it grows. Churchill and Lewis (1983), Scott, and Bruce (1987) have identified at least five separate stages (see Figure 1). In the first stage the business is conceived and established. During this period, it is entirely the creation of its entrepreneur founder(s). All attention is given to finding customers and maintaining adequate cash flows to survive. The owner is the most important asset of the business, providing all its managerial skill, direction and capital.



Source: (Scott and Bruce, 1987)

FIGURE 1: THE STAGE-MODEL OF SMALL BUSINESS GROWTH.

If it survives, the business will pass into a second stage of "Survival". During this period the business is financially viable and may even hire additional staff. The owner-manager usually remains in control of the business and usually undertakes only minimal formal planning (Churchill and Lewis 1983). Many SMEs continue to operate in this stage for long periods of time, with a single or limited product line and any growth being driven by natural market expansion (Scott and Bruce 1987).

From the perspective of growth, it is the third stage that may be most critical. Churchill and Lewis (1983) identify two sub-stages in this "Growth" or "Success" period. The first of these is that of "Success-Disengagement". Here the business is economically strong and has sufficient size and product market penetration enabling it to sustain its current position. Its size is such as to require professional managers. In this sub-stage the owner-manager makes a decision to either grow or not. The business is usually profitable and can continue in its present form or is even sold at a profit (Scott and Bruce 1987).

If the owner-manager decides to opt for growth, the business will enter the "Success-Growth" sub-stage. During this stage, the owner-manager frequently places the business under risk to finance its growth. The need for professional managers may also increase along with the need for systems and enhanced planning. As noted by Scott and Bruce (1987) the most likely crises facing the business during its growth are the threats posed by larger competitors, and the demands placed on its resources as it seeks to develop new products or markets.

A successful growth strategy will take the business into the fourth stage of “Take-Off” or “Expansion”. It can also be identified at involving a process of “Team Building and Delegation”. The owner manager must develop a management team capable of taking over the increasingly complex tasks associated with running the business. If they cannot learn to delegate their responsibilities, they will have trouble in achieving effective growth. Further, as the business moves into the resource mature stage it will require greater “Team-Based Development”. Failure to achieve effective management team effort will impede its efficiency.

In this critical stage, the businesses will either succeed to develop into a big business or not. As it grows, the business will become more formalized in its accounting, management and other systems. The needs for greater quantities of capital are likely to lead the business towards equity finance. This may pose difficulties as the business seeks to secure long-term debt against its assets. Major crises facing the business during this stage are frequently those associated with the distancing of the original entrepreneur owner from the day-to-day running of the firm. Expansion requires the introduction of more professional managers. As noted by Scott and Bruce (1987 pp.50-51):

> *“They will not have the commitment to the business that those who were with the business from the early stages had and are unlikely to be prepared to make the same sacrifices ‘for the sake of the business’. This situation is potentially dangerous and can cause a crisis.”*

The fifth and final stage of “Maturity” or “Resource maturity”, sees the business with sufficient resources to conduct formal strategic planning. Its management structure is likely to be decentralised and there is a greater separation between the owner and the business in terms of financial and operational matters. Large-scale investment in marketing and production facilities during this stage may result in additional equity financing. Many entrepreneurs have trouble with pressure from shareholders over strategic directions.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ENTREPRENEURS

The principal characteristics that define the entrepreneur tend to be a strong drive to achieve and a sense of competitiveness. They are creative and frequently open to new ideas and opportunities, but they also seek to do things quickly and can be impatient. Such people are often good initiators and have the ability to launch new ventures.

According to Kazumi (1995) the entrepreneur is characterised by a combination of abilities and personal characteristics. Among the key abilities are such things as imagination, the ability to create and execute plans, negotiation, leadership and managerial skills. The personal characteristics are determination, optimism, independence and a willingness to take risks and rise to challenges. The qualities were supported by earlier studies in the United States (Brockhaus and Horwitz 1985).

Caird (1991; 1993) examined the characteristics of enterprise behaviour and found that the key attributes included a strong need for achievement, strong need for autonomy, high creativity, a willingness to take calculated risks and a strong internal locus of control (e.g. believing in self-determination). Owner-managers of small business were found to profile high on all five characteristics, and significantly higher than all other occupation groups against which they were compared.

Kuratko and Hodgetts (1998) note that several myths surround entrepreneurship. In general the characteristics found among entrepreneurs are also found throughout the general population, although they are not always concentrated in sufficient proportions in all occupations or groups. Gerber (1993) has argued in his *'E-Myth: Most Businesses Don't Work and What to Do About It'* that most of the people who launch a new business venture are **not entrepreneurs** but technicians. For example, a plumber may start his own business but may retire many years latter having made little more than wages. The difference between the successful entrepreneur and the mediocre small business owner-manager appears to be their ability to think and act strategically.

The Owner Manager's Influence on Growth

At the heart of the small business growth process lies the owner-manager or entrepreneur. Churchill and Lewis (1983) identified eight factors relating to growth, which focused on the owner and their business. The owner related factors were the goals set by the owner, their operational abilities in technical skills (e.g. marketing, production), their managerial skills and strategic planning abilities. Business factors were financial resources, personnel, planning and control systems, and process technologies including customer relations, marketing and distribution processes.

Growth in the small business is strongly associated with the personality, attitudes and behaviour of the owner manager. For example, Perry, Meredith and Cunnington (1988) examined the relationships between the personal characteristics of owner-managers and small business growth. Their findings suggest uncertainty over all relationships except the need for achievement within the owner, which was indicated as significantly associated with growth.

The owner-manager who seeks to develop their small firm must learn how to become a successful entrepreneur. Research undertaken by David Hall Partnership in the UK found successful small business owner-managers use similar processes to start and grow their firms. Eight key personal development processes were found that were either developed prior to start up or as a result of the start-up process:

1) **taking responsibility** – the ability to take responsibility for the business;
2) **being persistent** – keeping going often in the face of adversity;
3) **seeking help** – actively seeking help from people when needed;
4) **personal rewards** – getting personal rewards and pay offs;
5) **obsessive commitment** – becoming obsessed with the work and challenge;
6) **coping with ambiguity** – dealing with uncertainty in a positive manner;
7) **building a network** – developing and maintaining a network of contacts; and
8) **providing leadership** – building an effective team by motivating people.

Small Firms Versus Large Corporations

The growth process requires the small firm to move its culture and processes towards that of the large corporation. On one side the small firm is defined by informality, loose job definition and open communication flows. One the other the large company is usually more rigid and formal with structured communication systems.

An example of the difference between large and small firms can be seen in marketing. Large corporations have substantial resources to devote to marketing and frequently have many levels of marketing management with responsibilities for national and regional operations, or different product lines (Webster 1992). A feature of the large corporation is its use of formal planning processes to guide its marketing activities (McColl-Kennedy et. al. 1990). By contrast most small business proprietors find the marketing of their businesses a complex and difficult task. Unlike larger firms, the small business lacks both resources and expertise (DITR 1987).

For example, while the large corporation can afford a dedicated team of trained marketing specialists, the small business owner-manager is forced to carry the burden of being responsible for sales, marketing, personnel, publicity, production and financial matters. In most cases the owner-manager without any formal training performs these duties. Marketing knowledge and skill among small business proprietors is generally low and many consider marketing to be little more than selling or advertising (Gold 1993).

Small firms also lack the same systems to allow strategic planning, human resource management or financial control to take place in the same way as large firms. Entrepreneurial SMEs are therefore characterised by informality and lack of systems. They can be highly flexible in the face of external environmental challenges or opportunities. However, they remain dependent to a much greater degree on their entrepreneurial leaders.

Bridging the Gap Between the Small and Large Firm

By their nature small firms are culture driven while large firms tend to be systems driven. In order to grow successfully the small firm needs to bridge the gap between the culture orientation and the systems orientation. The development of a blueprint for a successful business model has been found to be highly important. Consider MacDonald's. In the 1950s the MacDonald's brothers developed the basic techniques of manufacturing hamburgers. However, it was a Milk Vendor salesman, Ed Koch who recognised they had a successful blueprint that could be developed into a global business. The key to this success is learning how to transfer knowledge. MacDonald's has worked out how to pass on their 'success system' to people throughout the world.

Gibb and Davies (1992) examined the growth process of small businesses in the United Kingdom. This analysis focused on the 'base potential for development' inherent within the firm. Growth was contingent upon the financial, physical and human resources available to the owner manager as well as their own experience, leadership, ideas and control base. A combination of external and internal factors needs to be considered by small business owner managers seeking to grow their firm's operations.

The owner-manager needs to identify the 'distinctive competencies' that have made the business successful. This may be its location, key staff, networks or control over proprietary technology. Once the firm's distinctive competencies have been identified the owner-manager must seek to move the firm from its dependency on him or herself by putting in place systems that can enable the business to operate independently of the owner-manager. Among the most likely 'distinctive competencies' that can serve as a base for future growth are (Gibb and Davies 1992):

- **The resource base** – both physical and human resources;
- **The experience base** – age of the firm, its level of experience in its industry, markets and other key areas;
- **The control base** – how good is the firm's information on its cash flows and management of production, people and customer relations;
- **The ideas base** – how well does the business generate good ideas or R&D and how well does it turn these into marketable products or services?
- **The Leadership base** – here the owner must look to himself or herself. What is their education level, age, family background, degree of strategic awareness and willingness to take responsibility for leading change?

It is from these areas that a firm draws its distinctive competencies for developing future competitive advantage and future growth potential.

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER AND DELEGATION

As the business grows the owner-manager must learn how to transfer knowledge from themselves to their employees. In the early years the owner is usually everything. Without their involvement in the business there is no business. As such the concentration of knowledge lies mainly with the owner across all these key areas. As the business gets larger and the scale and scope of its operations widens the owner must find ways to transfer knowledge in these key areas to employees. If the business is to grow the concentration of knowledge must shift gradually to the employees of the firm. Owners need to learn to step back and let go.

Learning to step-back and let-go requires the owner-manager to identify clearly where they wish the business to move over the longer term, and then develop a blueprint for their business accompanied by staff training and development (Bates 1999). Once such basic human resource (HR) policy is in place the owner-manager can set about adequately managing growth. A study of 364 small firms examined problems experienced over their life cycle (Dodge and Robbins, 1992). This found significant differences between the types of problems facing the firm during its lifecycle. During the growth stage accounting; inventory control and cash flow issues often dominate.

Sharlit and McConnell (1989) point to a staged process of how a small firm grows. In the first stage of this process - 'Creativity' - communication is informal and jobs roles and functions equally flexible and unstructured. Owners frequently realise that they lack the skills to effectively manage their HR function and look to build a management team to assist them. During the second stage - 'Direction' - a newly developed management team changes the company structure and sets more defined job descriptions. Employee training is implemented and supervisory jobs are created. Communication becomes less spontaneous and more formal.

For most small business owners the key challenge is to learn how to delegate while simultaneously creating a team-learning environment within their company. A longitudinal study undertaken with 576 start-up firms in the United States over a ten-year period examine the owners' ability to delegate various functions (Ardichvili, et.al, 1998). This found that formal HR programs and policy did not emerge until turn over exceeded US$10 million for manufacturers and US$3 million for service-based firms. Delegation of different business activities commenced first with the accounting functions and less so with production or information systems. Delegation of HR functions did not take place until much later. The owners largely retained the role of planning. Training was required fairly early among these firms and across a range of different functional areas.

If the owner cannot learn to delegate responsibilities they may risk becoming overextended with detrimental impacts on their capacity to plan and successful develop market opportunities (Cronin 1991). The ability to delegate is an important step in the owner's transition from a small entrepreneurial business to a larger mature one (Weiner 1985). According to Baker (1994) the challenge for owner-managers is to create a suitable environment in which their employees can learn to assume responsibilities.

TEAM BUILDING FOR GROWTH

An important element of designing the new business venture or developing a business over time is the capacity of the small business owner-manager (entrepreneur) to select and train a competent team. Without the development of an effective entrepreneurial team (E-Team), the owner-manager will be unable to delegate responsibility to others. Successful team building requires time and recognition of individual differences with some need for consideration of the most effective balance between one personality type and another (Darling 1990).

An important step in understanding the role team building plays for the small business owner-manager is to examine the stages of development through which they progress as their businesses grow. During start up the owners key challenges are to design their future and then gather resources and people to follow their dream via a process of forming. Once the business has commenced the owner-manager has to learn to exploit their opportunities and learn to control the business. In the growth phase the owner faces four key challenges:

1) **Letting go** – moving from an individual to a team-managed business;
2) **Backfilling –** securing the existing business by installing systems, people and training before taking the next growth opportunity;
3) **Adding complimentary products and services** – introducing very similar products to existing customers; and
4) **Learning to manage** – learning to manage through people and taking a more strategic approach (Hall 1992).

Each of these stages requires planning by the owner-manager, but each requires the development of a team of capable employees that can assume some of the responsibilities of operating the business. The ability to let go requires team building, backfilling requires training and development, while the capacity to learn how to manage depends on the owner-manager's people skills.

Effective teams are characterised by a clear set of objectives and a willingness to work together to achieve them. Individual team members appreciate each other's capabilities and are tolerant of their limitations. Power is shared. Management of effective teams requires the skill of coaching members through the formative stages to a level of high performance (Koehler 1989). A study by Kerr and McDougall (1990) of 130 small business owners found the most important driving force for HR development initiatives was the owner's personal attitudes toward training and development. Further, the main benefit of such HR development activity was the ability to transfer 'core skills' between staff.

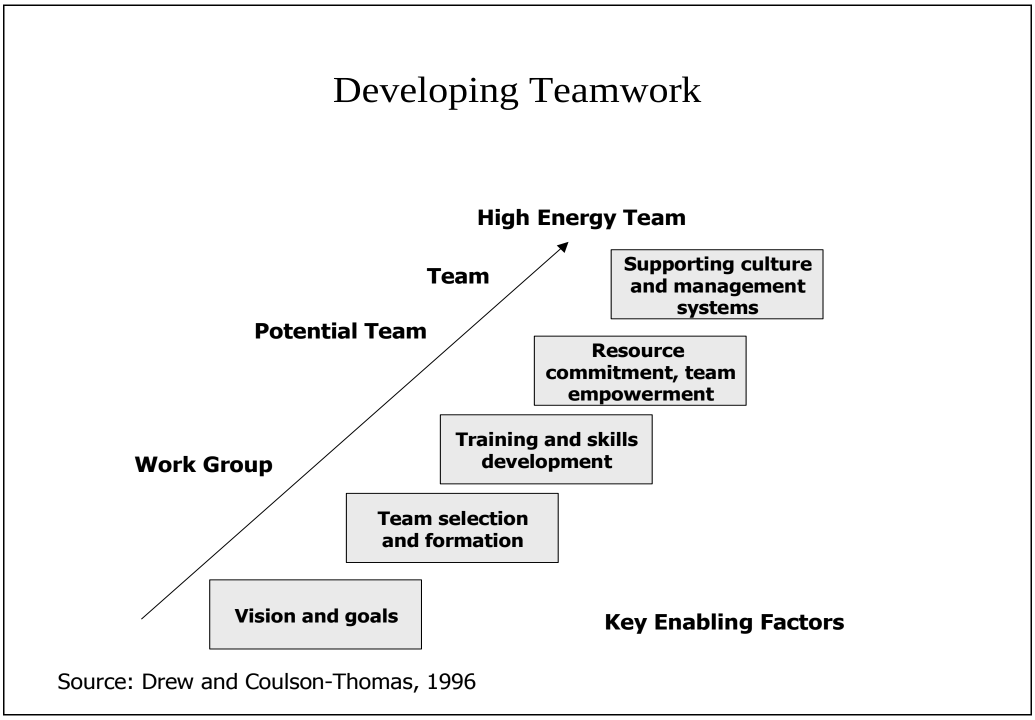


FIGURE 2: DEVELOPING TEAMWORK FRAMEWORK

Drew and Coulson-Thomas (1996) conducted a study of 100 firms and their approaches to team building and teamwork. They argue that the future of many industries will demand greater teamwork within organisations of all sizes. Further, the competitive success of firms may depend on their ability to develop new organisational structures that take advantage of teamwork and bring together networks or clusters of teams and firms spanning many traditional functions. The challenge for managers will be to implement adequate training and team development processes to take advantage of the opportunities. Figure 2 shows their conceptualisation of the framework required to develop a high-energy team. As shown, it commences with a clear vision and goal setting, moves into the selection of the team and their training and skills development. The organisation that seeks to make best use of the team must also ensure that it provides adequate resources and empowerment to team members. It will be important for the firm to have a culture that is highly supportive of teamwork and management systems that facilitate such work.

The development of effective teams is a time consuming and demanding task that will not be accomplished overnight. Small business owner-managers seeking to develop their own E-Team will need to allocate sufficient time and resources to the team building process. According to (Elmuti 1997) the failure of many team-based initiatives is due to a lack of clear goals and insufficient support from the company. Further, the delegation of responsibility to self-directed teams when employees are not ready to assume such responsibilities can be detrimental to the organisation. Employees may also view the implementation of self-directed teams as little more than another passing fad. As such they may be reluctant to put in the time required to really make the team effective. However, the benefits of self-directed teams are generally significantly greater than more traditional work groups if the process is effectively managed.

Coaching is Key

For the owner-manager (entrepreneur) operating a small firm experiencing growth, the need to delegate responsibility to a self-directed E-Team is critical. However, the owner-manager must realise the substantial commitment that will be required of them in seeking to implement such a strategy. For most small business owners the initial years of company foundation require them to be 'micro-managers', constantly engaged in the everyday minutia of the business. Companies founded by one or two owners are largely dependent on their owners for their survival in the first one to three years of operation. However, as the business grows it becomes necessary for the owner or owners to develop a team and learn to delegate.

Formichelli (1997) describes the problem as 'nano-management' and points to the risks of the owner failing to break free from the constant micro-management associated with the early stages of the firm's lifecycle. These risks include a lack of time for the owner to undertake important planning and business development tasks, failure to get the best out of their people, and owner 'burn-out' under the work pressure. Smith (1992) has highlighted the need for fast growing companies to develop good teamwork and delegation skills among senior managers. Baker (1994) also emphasizes the importance for owner-managers to empower their team by learning how to 'step back' and let empowerment take effect. As he explains, to completely abdicate responsibility is a recipe for disaster as control can be lost. Meddling around with teambuilding frequently fails because subordinates are not permitted to have real authority. What is needed is coaching. The successful coach carefully balances between intervention and interference.

Coaching is a process of unlocking a person’s potential to increase performance and helping them to learn rather than attempting to ‘teach’ them. The power of coaching is that if done well, the learner builds confidence and develops self-managed behaviours when acquiring new skills. However, effective coaching should be indirect and requires the coach to be a facilitator rather than a teacher. It does not generally work well in organisations that have highly directive and autocratic management cultures (Readshaw 2000).

Business coaching is a process that should involve at least four stages: 1) establish specific goals as well as long-term aims for the coaching process; 2) explore the current predicament in terms of personal reactions, problems and possibilities; 3) identify the options through which a realistic goal can be achieved; and 4) commit to a timed action plan through which the goal can be accomplished (King and Eaton 1999). It is important for those owner-managers who wish to undertake coaching tasks for themselves to realise that the qualities of an effective coach are listening skills, good questioning techniques, empathy, the ability to read non-verbal behaviour, and the capacity to establish motivation and commitment in others. Effective coaching requires the owner-manager to look for the potential in all employees (King and Eaton 1999).

One system that has been used effectively in business coaching programs is the GROW Model (Kirwan-Taylor 2000). This four-part framework is an easy method of assisting an individual to move through the desired stages of a coaching process. 'G' stands for GOAL and asks the individual what they are seeking to achieve in their job or career. The ability to set realistic goals is important to how successful the individual is at the tasks they seek to achieve. 'R' stands for REALITY and asks what the actual facts of the situation are. Too often people have many assumptions or prejudices, either about themselves or the organisation, and these serve to create unnecessary 'noise' when trying to get to the heart of the problem. 'O' stands for 'OPTIONS', what are the realistic options open to the individual in seeking to move from where they are to where they wish to be? Sometimes this stage of the process requires more information than is currently available. The coach may need to ask the individual to go away and gather more facts. Finally, 'W' stands for WHERE, WHEN HOW and WHY. It seeks to commit the individual to concrete action.

LESSONS FROM SUCCESSFUL ENTREPRENEURS

The Kauffman Centre for Entrepreneurial Leadership is one of the largest centres of its kind in the world. On a regular basis the centre holds discussion forums for successful entrepreneurs to exchange ideas and build knowledge through sharing experiences. In 1997 the centre held a 'gathering' of 12 entrepreneurs who discussed leadership, micro-management and the challenges of developing a team. This gathering highlighted the importance of motivation and inspiration for successful entrepreneurial leadership. Leaders of fast growing small firms must be motivators, positive reinforcers and empowers of their employees. Of importance is the ability to be flexible in leadership style, adapting to the needs of the growing organisation. During the early life of the business the entrepreneur or owner-manager is able to lead by being an expert. They know how to do the business better than most others. The need to be a 'jack of all trades' is also a requirement of this stage. Success in growing the firm is the ability to demonstrate leadership via having a clear vision and set goals for people, to have confidence in where things are going and be the driving force for the company (Kauffman Centre 1997).

Some key tips these entrepreneurs suggested to overcome the problems of delegation and avoiding the traps of micromanagement were as follows:

- Hire people who are smarter, better and more efficient than you;
- Ask questions first don't try to jump in with an answer;
- Constantly measure the downsides of all your decisions; will a bad decision break the business? If not proceed;

- Recognize the problems of being the ‘expert’ in the business; learn to delegate and transfer knowledge to the team;
- Get a mentor, someone who can teach or coach you;
- Change your management structure as you grow.

CONCLUSIONS

Successful growth in the small firm requires the owner-manager (entrepreneur) to learn how to ‘step back and let go’ from the daily tasks associated with the management of the business. While this seems obvious it is not an easy task and is frequently the most challenging aspect of growth in the small firm. To achieve effective growth the owner-manager will need to learn how to develop an “E-Team” or a self-directed team of employees who are motivated to make the business as successful as the owner would like it to be. Building this E-Team will require the owner-manager to learn how to delegate responsibility, coach employees and recruit effective new team members. Leadership will be vital to the success of this and the owner must learn to provide clear vision and goals for the team and then resource and empower them.

As the firm moves through various stages of growth the size and complexity of the management task will also multiply. Owners must shift from doing to leading, working ‘on’ not ‘in’ the business. They must realise that team building and coaching will gradually take up more and more of their time as they create a self-sustaining, self-managing business entity. However, the rewards for the owner-manager (entrepreneur) will be substantial. A business that is able to confidently operate without the original founder keeping their hand on the levers will be more likely to fetch a good price if sold, and will certainly permit the entrepreneur to either retire in comfort, or use it as a launching pad for new venture opportunities.

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