

Are you a control freak? 5 ways to stop

Marketing Intelligence / Joanna L. Krotz

For entrepreneurs, the drive to be in control is the best of traits and also what could be their Waterloo.

Certainly, infant businesses can't thrive without a founder's laser focus and passionate attention to detail.

But as chaos subsides and business starts chugging along, take-charge Dr. Jekylls often turn into Mr. Hydes, losing their inner demon: the control freak. Usually, entrepreneurs are so involved in nurturing their baby businesses, so breathlessly invested in every step the baby takes, that they don't recognize the moment when the company actually walks on its own.

At that point the master problem-solver typically turns into the problem himself (or herself).

When owners can't let go, companies are stunted. Employees and opportunities hit the wall of a chief executive who insists on knowing every trivial thing, being at every routine meeting, calling each and every shot.

Do you feel the chill of recognition? If you want your business to grow, stop feeding the monster. Get your control freak under control. Here's how.

1. **Get rid of Superman.** The irony here is that the better you are at building the business, the more complex and unmanageable the company becomes. By the time it's too big to handle on your own, you're so used to being in charge that you're sure it's all under "control" — until something goes wrong. You'll lose a key client. A talented partner will walk. Your spouse will get fed up. The control freak will be gleeful.

Listen: "You can't do it all," says Marty Kotis, who says he learned that lesson the hard way.

After opening a branch office of his Greensboro, N.C., real-estate development company, Kotis decided to manage both the headquarters office and the branch office. He made the seven-hour round-trip drive each week to work for a day in the second office, eating up time, energy, resources and opportunities. Eventually the light bulb flashed on.

He finally hired a manager to run the branch office. "I travel there once every couple of months or less," Kotis says. "We communicate often via e-mail and phone. The office has been extremely productive. I focus on generating deals; he focuses on the market."

2. **Chuck your ego.** Cousin to the Superman syndrome, this control freak keeps whispering that no one does anything as well as you do. Nobody works harder or better. No one cares as much. No one puts in as many dedicated, fully productive hours.

Resist such self-flattery. You can't start letting go until you have a clear-eyed assessment of your own strengths and weaknesses. You need to review and find the additional talent, skills or personalities required to drive growth.

"Hiring more people like us may give us comfort but doesn't often provide the necessary balance of employees to run a business," says Joseph Weintraub, management professor at Babson College and co-author of "The Coaching Manager." Confidential to your freak: Some people out there know more than you do.

3. **Let go in stages.** Despite the entrepreneur's tendency to get everything done yesterday, don't rush into delegating. If you have staff ready to shoulder the load, suddenly shifting your responsibilities won't stick. It must be done gradually, so both you and they can grow into the unaccustomed roles. If you need to hire new help, move thoughtfully.

In 1998, at the age of 28, Katherine Rothman founded her New York public relations agency, KMR Communications, which specializes in health care and the beauty industry. Now the agency has swollen to a staff of 15 and racks up multimillion annual revenues.

Yet Rothman still oversaw all day-to-day operations, including payroll, invoicing and billing, ordering supplies, human resources, employee benefits and orientation, and more. She assigned tasks to different employees, but no one tracked everything except her. "It was all done piecemeal," she says.

Mostly, Rothman was afraid to trust anyone with the financial side of the business: "I've heard so many bad experiences. People being robbed by bookkeepers, turning over control and having that person leave, losing confidential records."

Eventually, as with Marty Kotis, Rothman was pushed to make changes. She recruited a director of operations and chose a candidate who had 20 years of experience, all at one firm. That stability increased her comfort level.

Still, "I did not turn every task over to her at once, as it would have been hard for me and overwhelming for her." Instead, Rothman kept her own set of records and notations while letting the new director work alongside her, making an additional set. "As the weeks have gone on, I have seen how accurate and meticulous she is and now have relinquished more and more to her jurisdiction. This was the smartest hiring move I ever made. My life is so much easier and efficient now."

4. **Get help from specialists.** Tapping the objective insights of outsiders can help you figure out where to hold on and where to let go. But be selective about who you ask. The point is to find people whose advice you respect and heed — advisers who have both the expertise and good will to help you grow.

Regular meetings with an informal board of advisors can help, whether they're paid or not, and whether you see them individually or as a group. You can work with a professional business coach for a few months — check references before signing on. Some owners rely on close friends or professional associates. Others get advice from the bank executive where the company does business, or a local management consultant or chamber of commerce officer.

5. **Delegate, don't dump.** Don Dymer, a former Scotland Yard police inspector, started his pre-employment screening business in Jacksonville Beach, Fla., in 1995. SingleSource Services now screens about a half-million people each year and has 12 employees.

Dymer says he learned a lot about how to delegate by working within the military hierarchy of a police force. "You have to empower people and give them status. You can't just dump a job on people with the attitude that you can't be bothered to do it so you're asking them."

He also emphasizes the need for "employees to take on the mission and values that you want the business to take on." You do that by setting an example and making sure to define those values with every new hire.

In addition to his stable and motivated staff, Dymer says the reward of empowering employees is his ability to take frequent vacations. He takes off a few weeks at a time three or four times a year. Says Dymer: "I tell my employees that they need to make the decisions. And even if they make the wrong decision, if it's for the right reason, the company will back you."

And that's the true test: Vacations are the ultimate triumph over the control freak.

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