Systems for Solopreneurs

from Michael Gerber

How does it work for the one-person to become a "turn-key" operations?

Our answer starts with your intention. For the "soloprenuer" there are really two paths you can take: one is to be clear with yourself that you're not creating a business, just a stream of work as a self-employed professional, and the other is to see this as just a step on the road to getting more clients or customers and eventually hiring others to take on some of the technical task. Either, way, system development is critical for success and the work involved is much the same for whichever path you decide to take.

The Seven Centers for Solopreneurs

Michael Gerber created the Seven Centers of Management Attention, which is a great tool for business owners to organize the work of the business. You do not have to have employees to put this model to work in your business. It's a valuable model for solopreneurs too.

If you look carefully at any business , you will notice that there are key functions that focus directly on interacting and serving customers. They are Lead Generation, Leader Conversion, and Client Fulfillment. There are also key functions that focus primarily on the care and development of the business itself. They are Leadership, Marketing, Money and Management. Together these functions make up the Seven Centers of Management Attention model Thinking of your business in the context of these key functions enables you to view it systemically. In other words, your business is one working system with seven major supporting systems. It is a powerful and holistic business model that effectively demonstrates the integrative nature f all the primary systems in a business.

If you examine the strategy and activities of the different centers, you'll quickly understand that a lone real estate agent, psychologist or graphic designer still have both strategic and tactical work to accomplish in each center. The loan practitioner needs systems in their Money, Marketing, Client Fulfillment, Lead Generation, and Lead Conversation centers just like any other business. Since they're on their own, much of the works in Leadership and Management focuses primarily on developing themselves as efficient, organized, self-directed leaders and managers of their individual enterprise.

So where do you start?

This question is never simple to answer, since every solopreneur is in a different place as far as what they've already systematized.
Recently I coached Jodi, a graphic designer beginning her career as a solopreneur. My experience with her may help other solopreneurs get an idea for the process.

My work with Jodi began with the idea that if things worked out, perhaps, eventually, she might employ others. Not exactly intentional, yet I knew following the process of system development would help her immensely and set her on the right path regardless of her ultimate goal. And following along with our strategy should help you see what you need to do.

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Prioritize Your Systems

Jodi and I started out in the Money center. She got herself set up on Quickbooks and created clear systems for invoicing, tracking costs and allocating them to projects. I coached her through the process of generating her first income statement and helped her understand it. Then we developed a very simple cash flow system for her to manage the lifeblood of her business. Most importantly, I cautioned her not to mix personal and business finances and to have a separate system for each.

Next I suggested she develop a clear prioritization and time management system, both to keep her on track and maintain efficiency, but also to help her schedule her time so that she could divide it between paid technical work and business development. I emphasized the essential skills of organization, discrimination (priorization) and focus (concentration) to make certain she was on top of her game.

Fortunately for Jodi, she had enough clients at the time, so we decided to address her Client Fulfillment systems so she could satisfy her customers every time. She looked at the work flow and the communication points and created an assessment form, a proposal template and a communication system so that she felt assured she'd both get the right information starting out and also have systems support for the entire project. Each solopreneur's client fulfillment system has different components, but the basic idea is to analyze the work flow an discover the essential points that effect your clients and create processes to manage them.

We then moved on to the Marketing center of her business, which is marketing research and strategy. This essential for any solopreneur since too often they fail to market when they're busy, then go long periods of time without any work. So we dug in, looked at her customers base and target markets, and came up with her unique positioning. This enabled us to then focus on Lead Generation and Lead Conversion by creating a simple system for generating qualified leads, and another system for working them through the sales (or lead conversion) process.

The End Product

So there you have it: a simple approach for the solopreneur in any technical discipline, based on the premise of working _on_ your business and _not in_ your business. This development work created a sustainable platform for Jodi regardless of her ultimate objectives. Most importantly, it provided a sense of comfort and ease when she focused on her design work, since she now had systems to support the other areas of her business. This structure and sense of order also helped her experience an overall better quality of life, both on the job and outside of it.

If Jodi builds her client base and work load to the point of adding an employee or contractor, she's already elevated herself through this entrepreneurial perspective, so she can quickly develop her leadership and management skills to make certain others can fulfill her clients in a similar fashion.

So whether you're a solopreneur for your entire career or find yourself enticed by building a business, this process of system development will provide the foundation for giving customers what they really want and need: your promise delivered every time, on time, then surpassing even that!