

The Business Engine. Jeff Wilson, PhD.

Once you understand that results are achieved by acquiring a series of beliefs and strategies, a logical next question becomes “Rather than simply randomly accessing individual beliefs and strategies that seem to be useful, is it possible to access and assemble them in ways that are more powerful and strategic?”

The answer to this question is certainly, yes. A useful analogy might be building a house. Once you know that a well constructed house contains things like a basement, plumbing and joists, is there a strategic way to assemble this information to build an excellent house every time? Certainly – it’s called a plan.

A highly useful plan that will help to construct virtually anything you want I call the Business Engine, shown in Figure 1. The business engine is a machine that is specifically designed to create for you whatever you want. Although it’s called a *Business* engine, I don’t want to give the impression that it is only useful at work. The business engine works for any kind of “business” you might be interested in – like raising a family, directing yourself to lose weight – or creating a functional team at work.

The business engine describes the functioning of an effective business unit. A business unit might be one person, a small group (like a work team) or an entire government agency or company.

The engine consists of a triangle with Personnel, Product and Marketing at each of the three corners. Underneath, it is supported by Administration. You might think “Well, that just defines the components of any business” and in a way you’d be right. Read on, however. Like many things in life, the business engine is actually more than it might appear to be at first glance.

The business engine creates what you want by turning – kind of like a Mazda rotary engine. As it turns, it spins off things like fun, contribution, intellectual stimulation, security and money.

How do you start the engine spinning? There are many ways, but the one that I believe works best is this. The business engine begins spinning when someone we’ll call the “Manager” goes to the “Staff.” The “Manger” then engages the “Staff” in a conversation about what it is they would like to achieve. Often the staff have difficulty articulating this with clarity, so the manager helps them to discover what they might really be passionate about achieving. For example, good managers know that almost everyone wants to achieve some level of success, feel valued, be economically secure, grow personally, have fun and so on, even if some of us are fuzzy about these things in our own minds. They also know that many of these things can be achieved within the work place.

Next, the manager helps the staff to see that they will be able to get more of what they want by finding a ‘Market’ they would like to serve. In the case of a government agency or company, the primary market often consists of higher management, but it could

equally include other internal or external clients. The manager then helps lead the staff to the market and to engage the market in a conversation about what it really wants. Then, together, the manager and staff create products and services that serve the market's needs. The engine also works best when it's supported by lean and effective administrative systems – like written objectives, protocols, timelines and checklists – that the manager and staff create together to make things run more smoothly.

Individual business engines can be pulled together to make larger ones that create a critical mass that can accomplish things that one person couldn't on their own. In a corporate or institutional setting we call these companies, or organizations. So for example, the largest triangle in Figure 1 might be a company, the medium sized triangle a department and the smallest one an individual.

Although you might think that trying to pull together a series of apparently “autonomous” business units would result in anarchy, the opposite is actually true. Part of the elegance of the business engine is that it offers a structure for independent individuals and teams to pull together in the same direction – willingly, because it is in their best interest to do so. Part of the reason why business units tend to pull together resides in the nesting of one inside the other. Thus, a main (but not only) client for the individual is the department. Similarly, a main (but not only) client for the department is the organization. This structure, in effectively managed organizations, helps to ensure a unity of purpose. This is especially true when managers offer effective tools to support the staff in their joint objectives. These include effective multi-way communication, fairness, clearly articulated common goals, learning opportunities for everyone and so on.

How does this structure allow for the harnessing of effective beliefs and strategies which serve everyone in the organization? The engine shows the four principle components of every effective business unit. Each is important and is a limiting factor for the other three and they are related in a specific order as we have described above. Optimizing a business unit is then simply a process of continually improving, through a series of low risk tests, the beliefs and strategies of management and staff related to each of the four components in a balanced, proactive and strategic manner. This activity is known as working **ON** the business.

Here are some other useful insights that the business engine provides:

- It is in every individual's best interests to access additional resources (i.e. markets) from within and outside the organization to help serve their own needs. This also helps the organization.
- It is in the personal interest of every individual in the business to access additional personnel (from both inside and outside the business) by identifying people whose needs they can serve by partnering with them. This too helps the organization.
- Building lean and effective administrative systems is essential to support growth and improvement of the business, to everyone's benefit.



- Continuous improvement of the business to everyone's direct benefit can only occur through learning. Hence, training (that is, experiential learning in its broadest interpretation) at every level is pivotal to business optimization.

That being said, here are some of the most common things that people do which slow down the business engine and actually prevent them from getting many of the things that both they and the organization as a whole, really want.

1) Creation of an environment of authority/dependency

A very common situation is managers who, with the best of intentions, approach their job from the perspective that it is their responsibility to make sure that "everything works out all right." Although on the face of it this would appear to be helpful, the effect is often to do the precise opposite of what I've described above. Rather than engaging their staff in a discussion of what the staff wants to achieve, these well-intentioned managers reason that it is their responsibility to "get the staff to do a good job." As a result, they often try to infer what the staff want, without asking, or worse, forget about the real needs of the staff altogether. Having failed to identify what the staff want, these managers are in the unenviable position of having to "motivate" them to produce products. Stripped of any real "power" these managers can only rely on relatively weak motivational tools like authority, manipulation and so on. Of course, they find it very difficult to create any real relationship with many of the staff members.

Such managers then try to figure out what markets are worth investigating, partly because they think that is their job alone and partly because their staff no longer want to bother. Their ability to understand the needs of the market are thus reduced, and hence the results they achieve are also weakened. In the most extreme cases an unhealthy authority/dependency relationship develops where managers use the authority of their position to try to motivate the staff who, as a result, feel alienated. Ironically, the staff become dependent on management because the staff have not had an opportunity to develop the necessary skills to change their environment or move on.

2) Failure to understand the needs of the market and address them

This is another very common situation. In this scenario, management and staff lack the skills or motivation to legitimately understand what the market wants. Typically, they infer what the market should want or extrapolate what they would want themselves in the same situation. Failing to address the needs of the market seriously limits their ability to access resources and other things they might want – such as respect from the market (e.g. management), peace of mind, security and so on.

3) Failure to understand one's own needs and address them

In any business unit to which you belong, part of the staff includes yourself. Failure to understand and address your own needs has an impact which parallels that of failing to meet the needs of other staff members. Why would someone not address his or her own

needs in such a situation? There are many reasons, but common ones include feeling guilty about putting their own needs ahead of others, fear that failing to address external needs will lead to failure and compulsive work behaviors. Ultimately, if you don't address your own needs on a consistent basis, you run the risk of burnout, health problems and a feeling of having been abused. Ironically, these limit your ability to serve others in the organization and be personally successful.

4) Focus only on the production of product

This common situation amounts to viewing the business engine as a single point – Product – as opposed to a triangle. People who have this perspective simply don't understand that they have the opportunity and obligation to access additional resources and personnel to help them with their job. They view their role simply as the creation of product, usually under a budget and staff fixed by someone else. Typical problems that these individuals encounter include making products that aren't really needed, and burnout because of lack of help.

5) Failure to work consistently **ON** the business

As mentioned above, a critical function of a business unit is to consistently (i.e. daily, weekly) and systematically identify and implement improvements to the four functions of the business engine – working **ON** as opposed to **IN** the business. Very commonly, individuals and sometimes whole organizations become habituated to simply performing these four functions as they have always been done. In a non-competitive environment this can readily lead to stagnation as staff and management have little opportunity for personal growth. In a competitive environment, it is a recipe for disaster. An important component of working **ON** the business is developing an environment (e.g. facilitated by regular weekly meetings) where staff and management can access new strategies and beliefs from outside the organization, test them and share the results of their tests. Such strategies can be accessed through books, seminars, interviews with non-competing organizations and a variety of other venues.



Figure 1.

The Business Engine

