

## What lies beneath

Busy business owners may be blinded to deeper issues

If you are running a business, you are nearly always in the middle of something or other. (If not, better take a look at why things are so quiet.)

Business owners are always balancing complex relationships with employees, customers, directors, vendors, advisers, bankers — the list goes on, I'm sure. Not to mention the personal relationships affected by the business.

Whatever we're in the middle of at work has an impact, of course, on how we are at home or when we're socializing with friends. What we're in the middle of in the business, probably most of all affects our time alone. When we want to relax, get lost in a book or a movie or a walk among the falling leaves, it is often difficult if not impossible to silence the chatter in our heads about the work stuff. We can become plagued by "monkey brain," as some Zen followers call it.

I know exactly what they mean.

When people are in the middle of something, they might call on me to help untangle the knotty thoughts, or figure out what to do about a dilemma that's been persisting and ruining any hope of leisure time. A coach can help clients get back in touch with their own problem-solving skills — the skills and inner resources that have become buried under the negative obsessive thinking about a stressful situation or a pile-up of them.

Coaches ask provocative questions. Sometimes the client is so weighted down, repeatedly saying, "I don't know, I just don't know what to do!" I might throw out a question like "Well, if you did know what to do, where would you start?" Seems like a question that would

be annoying at best, but such a line of respectful questioning can lift the client's mind from the hopeless, helpless stuck state and into the beginning of a resourceful state.

It is never the coach's job to solve the problem, but to turn on the lights so to speak, and support the clients fully as they create their own solutions. Usually our best mental resources click off under stress, or in the wake of an emotional flood. Survival mode clicks in and we experience a drive to fight or flee — rarely the best strategies to resolve the obstacles we've encountered in the business. Rarely the best strategies to enrich a relationship with anyone.

And, as we all know, often the circular and exhausting arguments in our minds are just the crusty top layer grabbing our attention. Underneath may be a much more important and larger theme. The deeper issue may take longer to resolve, but once cleared up the nagging, smaller "gremlin" issues will be swept away too. A coach will keep the conversation moving deeper, closer to the client's core values, closer to what is most important to the client. When those abiding core values are being ignored, or seemingly at war, everything else is seen through a negative lens.

One very bright client was losing his personality, as he put it. His light spirit and customary genial way with people was eroding fast. It seemed everything and everyone irritated him. The tension from all that bristling was beginning to affect his physical well-being and minor ailments seemed to crop up one after another. He was waking up in the wee hours and obsessing even more about all

the difficult people surrounding him.

During one of those 3 a.m. sleepless moments, he surprised himself by saying out loud, "Well, maybe it's me!"

The next day he called me for an appointment.

After some time spent getting to know Tom, his core values, business history, strengths and talents, we started pulling apart all of the nagging thoughts that had been crushing him for the past months. Tom had taken on a partner about a year before we met. The partner and Tom had been friends for over 20 years. As Tom talked about their relationship, gradually it became clear to both of us that he was blind to the real source of his angst. Tom and his partner were long-time friends and had a history of many fun times together. When the partnership conversation came up, it seemed like a natural to both of them. Their two wives were friends as well, so a happy foursome went out and celebrated this new business relationship. The truth that Tom was hiding from himself, what he was trying hard not to see, was that the two guys were miles apart on their beliefs about how a business should be run — specifically how employees and customers should be treated. The partner was all about increasing sales at any cost and indeed sales were fairly good. What Tom was picking up though, was a chain of troublesome relationships inside and outside of the office. The core values that Tom held, the values that kept him in integrity, were being violated left and right by the partner.

Eventually Tom faced and spoke his truth to the partner, who left the business

with Tom's reputation as a straight-shooter and humane boss a little in need of repair, but clearly recoverable. The friendship gradually faded and Tom was OK with paying that cost for a return to peace of mind and a happy workforce.

Blind spots are such a human condition and by definition not usually amenable to a self-help fix. Sometimes we have that beautiful "aha!" moment and the whole world of our self-deceptions opens up. More often we get very bruised and battered before we really get close to the core problem. And sometimes a professional coach can guide us through the rough parts of self-discovery. It is always a privilege to be that coach.



**Jo Hawkins Donovan**

has a coaching and psychotherapy firm in Whitefish Bay. She can be reached at (414) 332-0300 or at [jo@hawkins-donovan.com](mailto:jo@hawkins-donovan.com). The firm's Web site is [www.hawkins-donovan.com](http://www.hawkins-donovan.com).