Tips For Staying Sane During A Turnaround

Certainly, toughness and determination are hallmarks of entrepreneurial success. Yet, through the years I’ve worked with more than 130 business owners and entrepreneurs, and I’ve seen that staying sane often takes more than just toughness and determination.

**TIP:** You want to build sanity into your organization. I’ll mention ways to do that, below.

The Ugly Back Story

Perhaps because of the heroic depiction of entrepreneurs in the media, many go into denial of the reality when their businesses are not doing well. Why? Because at that point they don’t feel heroic; they feel the shame of failure creeping in.

Keep in mind: the 130 entrepreneurs I mentioned are smart people. They have had success, yet I’ve seen dozens of situations in which an entrepreneur is faced with a really tough struggle, and determination just isn’t enough.

• One Sunday morning I received a call from a long-term client who was usually very succinct. He rambled emotionally about his poor financial situation. No wonder he rambled: he hadn’t slept in two days because of his worries.

• Another small business owner called me while he was driving to a psychiatric center to check himself in. The stress has “sent me over the edge and I need to get help. I’m going off the grid for a few weeks.”
• Another owner confided in me that he was having debilitating panic attacks, and didn’t know how much longer he could hide them from his staff.

Those stories don’t get as much coverage as the stories of brilliant successes, but they are very real. BTW: over time those three owners learned to cope and made their businesses successful.

As I mentioned, the overall tip I want to give you for staying sane is to build sanity into your organization. Here are a few ways to do that.

**TIP:** Who says you have to go it alone? You don’t. So don’t.

Given that most growing businesses do have times of great stress, it is surprising that there are very few places where the fears, and sometimes panic, of entrepreneurs and small business owners can be validated and addressed.

• Some business groups, such as [Vistage, for example, offer executive-to-executive guidance in small groups and via one-on-one discussions with Vistage Chairs about how to handle challenges and opportunities.](http://www.forbes.com/sites/kellyallan/2015/09/19/tips-for-staying-sane-during-a-turnaround/print/) [My company has worked with Vistage Chairs and Members for more than a decade, so I have seen the benefits.]

• Owners/Leaders of small businesses can get help implementing professional management as they grow/scale their businesses, including during stressful times, [via Aileron, a non-profit headquartered in Ohio, founded by billionaire entrepreneur Clay Mathile.](http://www.forbes.com/sites/kellyallan/2015/09/19/tips-for-staying-sane-during-a-turnaround/print/) Mathile has a passion for helping small and growing businesses.” [I’ve had numerous conversations with Clay Mathile and I have first-hand experience working with Aileron staff.]

In several posts I have shared the story of Bob Geis and his colleagues from the office of the auditor-controller of the County of Santa Barbara in regard to their turnaround story. Their story helps to summarize a number of tips.
TIP: Do what they did: they used their core beliefs to guide their decisions.

That isn’t so easy to operationalize if your core belief is that you merely want to get rich. That typically is not enough. Clay Mathile of Iams, for example, also wanted to do good things for his employees, the community and for dogs.

Sure, Bob Geis and his colleagues also used their intelligence – combined with the teachings of W. Edwards Deming – to transform their office. But, it was the core beliefs about what they wanted to accomplish and why they wanted to accomplish it that got them through the turnaround.

TIP: An anchor of sanity for Geis and his team has always been to think about the importance of the work and to be focused on improvement. Geis elaborates, “Evermore robust processes really matter, and making improvements excites us and give us emotional energy to continue the fight.”

TIP: As a part of always thinking about improvement, Geis says the leader needs to be a visionary, “It’s easier to stay sane and to jump every hurdle, when you have a vision of how things could be – look to optimizing the system so it really hums.”

TIP: Keep investing in people’s knowledge, even in a turnaround. Geis has had to cope with a lack of funding over the years, and he says, “It is tempting to cut the training budget first, but I’ve found it is better not to fill an open position than to cut training for everyone else. When you invest in people’s knowledge they repay you with higher productivity and with pride and joy in their work. Their knowledge will help save you.”
Betsy Schaffer, Bob Geis, and Theo Fallati. “How many leaders do you hear complain that ‘my people don’t want to change?’” Geis says. “I am guilty of having said that myself. Then, I learned that those people were resisting change mostly because they were working in an insane system.” [Photo by Lael Wageneck]

**TIP:** If you want to stay sane and stay focused during a turnaround, don’t let toxic human resource practices infiltrate your organization. Geis is not a fan of the usual and accepted HR practices, “like incentives and pay-for-performance. They waste your time, reduce productivity, don’t contribute to your stability or success –and they make people unhappy.

• “I’ve worked in private industry and in government, and in my experience, the Deming Management Method is flat out the best way to go. With Deming’s approach you focus on improving the system in which people work because the system controls about 94% of the results you get.

• “Not only that, by using Deming’s methods we have avoided the overhead and problems caused by the usual HR beliefs. Sure some county administrators continue to try to push those techniques on us, but when they see our effectiveness and efficiency, they realize we are doing something special — and they don’t want to tamper with it.”

**TIP:** “Create an environment for learning in which people can focus on making things happen and on getting things done,” Geis summarizes. “And don’t let anything get in the way of that. That is part of your system. That makes for happy, responsive, and responsible people. That helps create an effective turnaround—and it will help keep you sane.”

The TIPS, although unorthodox, made a big difference to many of the 130 companies I mentioned. They rejuvenated the leaders and
their companies. I hope you won’t need them, but if you are to be a successful entrepreneur, at some point you probably will.

_The author donates the honorarium paid for this blog to The W. Edwards Deming Institute®, a non-profit helping businesses and organizations achieve success through Deming’s philosophies._

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