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BI OWNERSHIP 07

Before You Change the Business, Ask These Three Questions

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Most owners know when something in the business needs to change.

The harder part is knowing where to begin.

You want better margins without losing good customers. You want your team to make more decisions without lowering standards. You want more time away, but you're still the person everyone calls.

Before adding another system, hiring another manager, or chasing more revenue, step back and ask three questions:

1. What do you want more of?
2. What do you want less of?
3. What do you want to stay the same?

> *The questions are simple. Honest answers usually aren't.*

Look at the Business From the Outside

Owners spend most of their time inside the work.

They answer questions, review bids, solve job problems, approve purchases, call customers, and watch cash. Handling today's problems leaves little time to decide what tomorrow should look like.

That makes it easy to confuse activity with progress.

More jobs don't always create more profit. More employees don't always give the owner more freedom. More revenue doesn't always produce more cash.

Look at the company as if it belonged to someone else.

If you were reviewing it for a buyer, lender, or new partner, what would you see?

Where is it strong? Where is it strained? What keeps working? What keeps going wrong? Where does the owner add value? Where does everything depend on the owner?

Then ask the three questions.

What Do You Want More Of?

Owners often answer this question with revenue, customers, employees, or projects.

> *More isn't always better.*

More revenue from poorly priced work creates a larger problem. More employees without clear responsibilities create more confusion. More customers who don't fit the company take time away from the ones who do.

Ask what you actually want more of. It might be:

- Profitable work
- Repeat customers
- Reliable cash flow
- Accurate job-cost information
- Employees who can make decisions
- Predictable schedules
- Strong trade partners
- Time to plan
- Time away from the business

Make the answer specific.

"I want more profitable work" is a start.

"I want more projects in our core market that meet our margin target and fit our current team" gives you something you can act on.

Ask:

- Why do I want more of this?
- How will I know when I have it?
- What must we do differently?
- What will it require from me?
- What should we stop doing to make room for it?

Wanting more is easy. Creating the conditions for it is the real work.

What Do You Want Less Of?

This question exposes the problems owners have learned to tolerate.

You may want less:

- Rework
- Confusion
- Owner approvals
- Late change orders
- Slow collections
- Employee turnover
- Emergency scheduling
- Customer disputes
- Poor handoffs
- Time spent fixing preventable problems

Don't stop at the symptom.

If you want fewer emergencies, find out what keeps causing them.

Maybe schedules aren't updated. Project managers may wait too long to raise concerns. Work may begin before the scope is clear. The company may be accepting jobs that don't fit its people or systems.

The cause may also begin with you.

If you want fewer decisions reaching your desk, give someone else clear authority.

If you want fewer interruptions, stop answering every question immediately.

If you want less rework, enforce the same standard when the schedule gets tight.

Ask:

- What keeps causing this?
- What behavior are we allowing?
- Who should own the correction?
- What am I doing that keeps the problem in place?

> *A problem doesn't disappear because the owner is tired of it. Someone has to remove the cause.*

What Do You Want to Stay the Same?

This may be the most important question.

Improvement work usually focuses on what's wrong. In the process, a company can damage something that was working.

Growth can weaken customer service. New systems can create distance between the office and field. New managers can change the culture. A push for speed can lower the quality of the work.

Before changing the company, decide what you must protect. You may want to keep:

- The quality of the work
- Long-term customer relationships
- A strong safety culture
- Fast payment to trade partners
- Direct access to leadership
- Honest communication
- The company's reputation
- Pride in the finished work

Be precise.

"We want to protect our culture" doesn't explain what the culture is.

Do employees help each other when a project gets difficult? Can people raise problems without being punished? Does the company keep its word when doing so costs money?

> *Name the behavior you want to protect. If you can't describe it, you probably can't preserve it.*

Face the Tradeoffs

Your answers may conflict.

You may want more growth and less risk. You may want fewer decisions on your desk while keeping control over every detail. You may want more time away while remaining the only person customers trust.

These conflicts aren't failures. They're decisions waiting to be made.

You can reduce owner approvals while protecting control by setting clear decision limits.

You can grow revenue while protecting margins by defining which work the company won't pursue.

You can give project managers more freedom while protecting standards through regular job reviews.

> *The goal isn't to remove every tradeoff. It's to see the tradeoff before it makes the decision for you.*

Choose Three Actions

Don't finish this exercise with a long improvement list. Choose:

- One thing you want more of
- One thing you want less of
- One thing you want to protect

Then assign one action to each. Here's what that might look like:

Category	Example	Action
More	We want more projects that meet our margin target.	Review the last 20 jobs and identify which customers, project types, and contract sizes produced the best results.
Less	We want fewer routine decisions reaching the owner.	Set written approval limits for project managers and review exceptions each week.
The same	We want to protect strong customer communication.	Set required customer contact points from award through closeout.

Every action needs one owner, one due date, one clear result, and one way to measure progress.

> *If no one owns the action, it's only an idea.*

Know Where to Start

Ask these questions at least once a year. Ask them before entering a new market, adding a service, hiring a key leader, or pursuing major growth.

Ask your leadership team too.

Their answers may differ from yours. That difference shows where the team sees the business differently and where an honest conversation needs to begin.

You don't need a complicated planning process to start improving the company.

> *You need enough distance to see it clearly.*

What do you want more of?

What do you want less of?

What must stay the same?

Answer those questions honestly. Then choose what you'll do next.