





OVERCOME YOUR EGO AND WATCH YOUR BUSINESS THRIVE

Entrepreneurs must control their self-image to achieve business success. **John Reynard** offers seven tools to help you on your way

In my early 30s I created a restaurant with no previous catering experience. I got myself into all sorts of trouble, but I learned a lot and, when the time came to move on, I sold it as a going concern. Later I set up a market research company and, while I had some good years, just like many entrepreneurs I oscillated between feast and famine. It was only when I started to understand the destructive power of the ego and apply appropriate tools to overcome it, that things started to change. We became one of the fastest growing and most profitable companies in our sector in Europe.

What is the ego?

As small children we are inherently enthusiastic about life and the positive feedback that we receive builds our self-esteem and pride in ourselves. This 'self-confidence' becomes a central core, and we draw from it the courage and strength to go out into the world and fulfil our dreams. This is the positive aspect of our ego.

The level of intensity with which we learn as children not only encompasses the good times but extends to

painful events too. We attach enormous importance to the attitude of others. If a carer or teacher repeatedly insists we are stupid, we lose confidence and may decide we are incompetent. If a sibling seems to be always favoured, we feel inferior and may think we are unworthy and unloved. The continued repetition of these experiences at a susceptible age, and in particular the debilitating stories we invent around such events, build a detrimental and weak self-image. This is the negative aspect of the ego. It is made up of powerful and painful feelings, and we don't know how to express or deal with them. We push them deep down within ourselves, draw a veil over them, and pretend they are not there.

Our hidden fears and secrets sit there quietly until someone says or does something to reactivate them. It might be a completely neutral statement or act, but we take it personally, interpret it as attack, and respond inappropriately or clam up and fume. If we never seek the truth of what lies behind these fears, they have power over us. We react defensively and make decisions we later regret.

We all suffer from negative egos, and we all experience circumstances →

that subconsciously remind us of memories that have caused us pain. We assume we are under attack and feel compelled to respond. This negative ego holds us captive and frequently results in self-sabotage and misery.

Signs of the ego being active in the work environment are when:

- ▶ There is no sense of flow. The business feels stuck, negative things keep recurring and never get solved satisfactorily.
- ▶ We wake up in the morning and resent going to work, or else find ourselves getting excessively angry or upset by what others either say or do.

Tools for overcoming the ego

Here are seven ways to overcome your ego, and push on with your business.

1. Resist blaming external circumstances

Blaming outside circumstances such as a recession, government policy or cancelled orders actually disempowers us. We give away our potential to adapt and close ourselves off from seeing new opportunities. This all happens at a subtle level but the effects are real. Far better in such situations to check our thinking and ask ourselves quietly:

'With regard to (name the challenge) what do I need to learn from this situation?'

We may have to do this several times over, but such self-inquiry helps release us from the prison in which we incarcerate ourselves when we blame outer circumstances. The answers we receive may not in themselves be the 'big idea' we need to break through, but they will nudge us towards the solution we need.

2. Resist judgment and criticism of others

Projection is the involuntary reaction we experience when faced with something within ourselves that we don't want to recognise. It is a remarkably subtle and involuntary ego defence mechanism. Its purpose is to avoid the fearful thoughts and feelings the conscious mind believes it cannot deal with. Rather than face what we perceive to be our negative traits, we blame them on others.

Projection comes into play when someone either says or does something

that stirs up a lot of emotion within us. For example if I get excessively upset by someone I judge to be arrogant, what is actually being brought to my attention is my discomfort around my own arrogance. Maybe I'm uncomfortable at putting myself forward and always let others take centre stage. If this is the case when I meet someone who demonstrates arrogance I get upset because I'm being reminded of something within me that I have yet to resolve.

We expend lots of energy in suppressing the aspects of ourselves we reject, but what we resist always persists. Far better when we notice ourselves doing it, check our thinking and ask ourselves:

'What is (name the person) reminding me of that is actually an aspect of my own personality that I do not like?'

Again, we may have to do this several times over, but the advantages are that we release ourselves from the projection and begin to see the other person in a new and positive light.

3. Attentive listening and 'pacing'

It pays to be a good listener. When people feel heard they start to lay down their defences and open up to understanding what you have to say. Pacing is when we acknowledge what the other is saying by repeating back to them what we have heard. An introduction might be:

'I'd really like to understand what you are saying. Can I repeat back what I think you are saying and you can tell me whether or not I have got it right, and if not where I'm going wrong?'

Pacing calms situations down, brings deeper understanding and creates



trust. It is a listening exercise – you are not agreeing to whatever the other is saying, but you are seeking a deeper understanding. It is used in mediation because it helps resolve conflict.

It is also a useful tool with people who tend to be ‘Ah-but-ers’, change-averse people who automatically object to new thinking. They are the ones who, just as soon as anything innovative is suggested, come up with a theory as to why it cannot work. Such people are on some level living in fear. When we make ourselves fully present and listen to them in an open way, they feel heard and supported and they begin to let their barriers down. The effect can be so freeing and uplifting that they relax their resistance sufficiently to give the new idea a proper try. I have even seen cases where people have completely turned around and become strong advocates for whatever it was they were previously set against.

4. Nurture intuition

The Universe is constantly trying to help free us from our negative ego and it speaks to us through our intuition. Unfortunately, however, pressures at work, being hunched over a computer all day, not taking proper breaks and stress generally all silence our intuition.

When we consciously decide to recognise our intuition, it willingly and increasingly communicates to us; by allowing it space and giving it focus, we



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strengthen it. We nurture our intuition by regularly absorbing ourselves in activities that take us completely away from our routine thinking, out of our heads, and into our bodies. For me, this is through meditation and walking in open country. For others, it might be running, horse riding, or dancing to music. The main criterion is that it be pleasurable and regular; it is too easy to get busy and make excuses. It is when we get back to our true selves and feel

relaxed and centred that we allow space for our intuition to come through.

5. Ask specific questions of our intuition

Our intuition wants to lead us to places beyond our limited imagination. It seeks win-win solutions and shows up as a step-by-step guide as to what best to do next. While it is expressed spontaneously through intuition, it can also be consulted pro-actively. When we ask specific questions of our intuition, we usually get an answer. It is important to relax, take a couple of deep breaths and step back from any immediate emotional ties to the issue prior to posing the question. The right answer will always carry more vitality and a deep sense of rightness. When people are first learning to recognise their intuitive voice they often ask what is the difference between the intuitive voice and the negative ego voice. I see the differences as follows:

Ego voice	Intuitive voice
Comes with a sense of urgency – a must-do	Comes with a deep sense of ‘rightness’
Feels restrictive	Feels uplifting and yet relaxed
Sense of fear – if not done, X will happen	May be scary because it takes us out of our comfort zone, but is possible
There is a degree of self-interest	Win-win solution/ all encompassing
Bit chaotic – one idea then another	Message gets repeated

6. Express our own vulnerability

The ability to admit our own vulnerabilities is a demonstration of our authenticity, and we gain respect for it when we do so. Those around us experience such sincerity as an expression of our trust in them. They feel drawn to us, and their loyalty is strengthened.

When I realised it was time for me to move on from my restaurant, I was extremely anxious. I believed that if I made it known that I wanted to sell, my staff would become worried about their jobs, and motivation levels would drop. I might also have been perceived as betraying them.

Suddenly, everything came to a head. We were in a team meeting, and I could not contain myself. I became emotional, told them I wanted to sell

the business, explained why, and said I felt I was letting everyone down. After a stunned silence, I was amazed: they completely understood and empathised. No one accused me of abandoning them. The sale became a joint endeavour, and there was no drop in energy or enthusiasm. All this stemmed from my being completely open and honest. By having the courage to allow myself to be vulnerable, I opened the door to others and allowed them to help me.

7. Away days

I’m a great fan of away-days for generating trust and letting go of the ego. It’s so good to get out of the office together, turn off all communication and talk. One particular exercise I have found beneficial is for everyone to write out on Post-it notes all their personal and work-related goals over the next one, three and five years. They then pin them on a time-line on the wall for everyone to read and ask questions of if they do not understand, but nothing should be judged or criticised.

Each person then talks through their goals and says why they are important to them. By the end, everyone has opened up and fully shared their dreams and aspirations. On the personal front it might be that they want to buy a new house or meet someone with whom they can establish a long-term relationship; on the work front it might be to take some particular training or to progress to manager level. What emerges is a genuine understanding of what drives one another and a desire to help each other achieve their goals.

Conclusion

When we overcome our negative ego we metamorphose it into a driving force, the dynamism we need to make things happen. Its detrimental energy is realigned in our favour, and we replace tendencies to self-sabotage with courage, confidence, and commitment. Our business always thrives as a result. **TJ**

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