

When the going gets tough

When you start up your own business, you often surge forward on a wave of optimism. With a great business plan, some support in place, and your first customers, life feels good, and you're invincible.

Then, one day, you seem to hit the buffers. A customer cancels, or the order book may not be as full as you'd like, or a job doesn't run smoothly, or the paperwork may be piling up. Maybe that little voice on your shoulder starts nagging about your "failings".

Running a small business can be tough. Realistically, there will be low moments, and times when you wonder why you're doing it. This is when you need to get Back on Track as quickly as you can. The longer you feel stuck, the more stuck you feel. Here are some tips to help on the not-so-good days.

Tips for getting Back on Track

Decide to do something

It may seem obvious to say that to get Back on Track, you have to want to. Recognise that you are temporarily off balance. It happens.

A bit **first aid** at this point can help take the edge off your anxiety. Try sitting in a favourite chair, eyes closed, taking a few deep breaths (always a good start), and then imagining in great detail the face (or the voice) of someone who makes you smile. Hold that vision for as long as you can before slowly opening your eyes.

Understand the problem

When you're feeling relatively calm, start by getting a firm grip on exactly what is happening. Write it all down in detail, or talk to someone you trust. When you fully understand, put your writing to one side. Don't keep going over it.

Revisit your goals and plans – where do you want to go?

Again, relax as much as you can, and then describe, in detail what you would like to be different about this situation. Review your business plan and goals; where are you, in reality? Gradually get back to thinking positively about your big dreams for your business.

If you want to, be creative – make a collage, write a story, or a poem if the urge takes you. If you do, keep it – you can use it to keep you going.

Remember your strengths and skills, and what's important to you.

When you're feeling strongest, who are you? What are your strengths? What is important to you, and how do you bring that to your work? How would your family, friends and colleagues describe your strong points? What knowledge and experience do you bring to this situation which you may not have had earlier in your life? These are your building blocks.

Learn from the low points

Now you have a vision for going forward, and a renewed sense of who you are, it's important to find the learning from being knocked off track.

Often when things aren't going so well, you don't have the opportunity to take stock in a neutral way. Friends and family can be great, and they will want to support you emotionally, which is really important, but not the whole story.

You need to take space to consider what, if anything, you might have handled differently. How can this experience make you stronger? What will you do in future to limit the emotional effect of the low points? This learning is important in helping to avoid a repeat experience – write your thoughts down.



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Plan to move on

Now you're more confident to build a plan for going forward, based on your business plan, strengths, expertise and values. What will you do? Who can help? How do you feel?

Staying on track day-to-day

Keep revisiting your goals and reviewing your business plan

If you're clear about where you want to go, and how you plan to get there, setbacks may affect you less, because you'll be able to check that you're broadly on track, and adjust if you're not.

Keep a log and celebrate your successes

As you go from day to day, keep a note of your wins and successes, write down what went well, and what you might want to do differently another time. On low days, you'll be amazed at your achievements as you look through your log. When things are going well, make sure you give yourself credit.

Treat mistakes as blessings

When you make a mistake, you're learning. Treat a mistake as an opportunity to build your business muscle, learn from it (see "learning from the low points" above), and make sure you don't repeat it. It took hundreds of "mistakes" to produce a working light bulb.

Be yourself

You're unique. Use your own strengths, talents, beliefs, and values to keep you going. Don't try to be someone you're not.

Get to know your Gremlin

We all have a little voice on our shoulder – our Gremlin. When things are tough, it may feel like your worst enemy. When it tells you you're not good enough, try contradicting it, by reminding it about your strengths and successes. Get to know it. Give it a name. Then invite it to take a holiday.

Be kind to yourself

You are human like everyone else, and just as entitled to take a break and do something that will make you feel good. Take care of yourself, and you'll be in better shape to meet setbacks.

Nurture your friendships

Time spent with friends helps keep a sense of balance in your life, and supports you through the ups and downs of the business rollercoaster.

Books and resources:

Mark Forster, "Do it Tomorrow" – great ideas for managing your time effectively.

Favourite quotes:

"One percent improvement per day becomes a hundred percent in three months" (from "The book of Yo" by Simon Woodroffe).

"Perseverance is failing 19 times and succeeding the 20th". Julie Andrews.

"Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." John Lennon.

"In the middle of a difficulty lies opportunity." Albert Einstein.

"Failure is only the opportunity to begin again, only this time more wisely." Anonymous

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