

Entrepreneur

Is Your Business Killing You?

Trying to be superhuman almost cost Dena Patton her company--and her life.

By Dena Patton |



A sudden feeling of nausea, shortness of breath and massive head pain had me leaping from my theater seat and rushing to the restroom. The producer, a good friend, had invited me to sit in on a rehearsal to provide feedback. The outing ended when I suffered a minor stroke--and started a journey that would change my life.

It was 1998. My high-stress lifestyle included running my own marketing and publishing company. I had an office on 57th Street in New York City and a sense of determination that was unstoppable. I was the typical, happy twenty-something in NYC in the era of "Sex and the City" and Mayor Rudy Giuliani. I was trying to date, get involved in philanthropy, learn about politics and enjoy the culture. But all of that got side-tracked because I was working myself to death without even knowing it.

I now often ask people, "Are you working late or are you working yourself to death?" You know what I'm talking about: the 16-hour days; the desire to please everyone (especially clients) by saying "yes"; the lack of play, joy and fun; the go-go-go-go-go; and the bad food that fuels it all. I was an entrepreneur, and all of that came with the territory, I thought.

But I quickly learned that failing to manage my own capacity, boundaries and health were deadly habits, and I discovered to my surprise that a lot of other female entrepreneurs struggled with the same demons. Years later, I found out that it's called the Superwoman Syndrome, and research shows that there are horrible consequences to it: addiction, divorce, migraines, heart disease, depression, jail and even suicide. For me, 1998 was a rough year, but it changed my life and my path forever--and for the better.

I hired a life coach to reprioritize my boundaries, reconnect my body and soul, and redirect my career. Like most women, I lived a busy life and didn't want to slow down my Superwoman lifestyle, but the one thing I did know was that I wanted to be a well-balanced Superwoman instead of an exhausted one. Looking at my clients, associates and friends, I could see the exhaustion in their faces, their bodies and, most of all, their spirits. I was saddened by the lack of joy in most Superwomen.

During that year of recovery (and discovery), I fell in love with the process and the results of coaching. Almost before I knew it, I sold my business (which has since become a successful global internet company) and began training as a business coach for entrepreneurs and leaders. It's the perfect career for me because it combines my love of empowering others with my spiritual calling to make a difference, my passion for results and my years of business experience.

That was in 2002, when coaches weren't so popular; in fact, most people didn't know what they were.

Forced to be resourceful, I hired myself to do the marketing, PR and networking for my new business, since those were my strongest skills. My new boundaries allowed me to set normal, healthy working hours and embark on a career that was all about empowerment, education and inspiration. I got to enjoy more charity work, NYC culture and all of the people and places of the city.

I also learned to let go of guilt and anything else that robbed me of joy. I no longer felt tied to my to-do list or a slave to my clients. When I worked with someone, it was on my terms (which were always generous).

I was taking care of myself, my business and my spirit. I was teaching CEOs, entrepreneurs and full-time moms to manage their capacity and say no to even the most demanding people. I created my own methodology to help business owners to reclaim their three B's: basics, boundaries and balance.

The basics are the top three to five most important things in your life--things that provide love, fulfillment and joy. If you know your basics in priority order, everything else becomes secondary or nonexistent.

With your basics in place, you can live accordingly, which leads to choices, leadership and time management--the "balance" part of the equation. It starts with a commitment to leave stress behind, and to practice leading a balanced life and making balanced choices. When you make balanced choices that honor your new-found basics, you learn to manage your time with integrity and breathing room, and avoid the running-ragged craziness. You learn to know your limits and manage your capacity better. For example, I don't add anything to my schedule after I hit 85 percent capacity, so I have 15 percent just for fun, creative and innovation ideas.

The third "B" is boundaries. Imagine that your basics are the flowers in a garden. Your boundaries are the fence protecting the flowers. Balance is the nurturing water and sun that makes them grow. Your boundaries are the invisible lines that communicate your values and your limits to clients, employees, vendors, family and friends.

My stroke was the biggest blessing in my life because it has given me years of working in the industry of inspiration through facilitating women's retreats at fabulous resorts, speaking around the country, coaching business owners to achieve their dreams and, most of all, steering leaders away from overwhelm, stress, burnout, heart disease and depression. Those very lessons strengthened my relationship with my mother and also brought me back to Arizona after 9/11. She was a struggling single mother most of her life. She knew how to survive, but implementing boundaries wasn't her specialty. The next seven years we had together were magical. More than anything, we were leading our lives by new rules and new boundaries and taking joy in it.

I was now married to a great man and eight months pregnant, and Mom was joyfully discovering retirement.

But a diagnosis of stage 4 pancreatic cancer soon rocked our world. At age 60, my mother was given one to six months to live. We talked about funerals and financials, and if she didn't make it to meet the baby. But the conversation soon turned to living. How do you live joyfully, knowing you are dying? It became our philosophy. She became a role model of how to live powerfully and joyfully, and how to die gracefully and peacefully. She was lucky: She lived 16 months and had time to prepare and say her goodbyes by throwing her own celebration-of-life party.

But that's not the case when it's a heart attack, stroke, suicide or sudden accident. There's no preparing and you have to ask yourself: Did you love your spouse like you wanted to? Did you forgive the people you wanted to? Did you use your business to share your spirit, gifts, love and passion with all of your customers? Did you prepare, so you don't leave your family and your business adrift?

You have the choice to be an exhausted leader who would have regrets if you died today, or the well-balanced leader who gives your joy, love, passion and spirit to your family, business, and to the world each day, knowing you are a role model to live powerfully and joyfully. You choose.

10 Tips for Creating Boundaries

Below are my top 10 tips to create boundaries in your life and business that will bring more balance, ease and joy into your life:

1. Honor yourself by setting realistic limits, managing your capacity, and saying "no" often. (use your values as a decision filter in your life and business)
2. Use your business as a delivery platform to give your gifts, joy, spirit and love away daily.
3. Create a self-care plan, and stick to it. If you are unhealthy, your business will be also.
4. Simplify. Get rid of anything that isn't useful, beautiful, loving or joyful.
5. Don't get consumed by your roles (i.e., business owner, wife, CEO, leader, father). Step out of that role daily for 10 minutes for meditation/prayer/inventory check. You are more than the roles you play.
6. Invest in your future by keeping yourself balanced, healthy and focused. Stop taking yourself so seriously.
7. Be your biggest fan, not your enemy.
8. People won't honor your boundaries if you don't honor them *first*. Then others will follow.
9. Create more play (for employees and for clients) in your business--it will grow.
10. Surround yourself with people who empower and honor you, not drain you.

Download Dena's CEO Self-Care Plan at amazinggreatness.com Dena Patton, is a business coach and speaker at www.DenaPatton.com