

The Reluctant Leader, Part I

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Jake is the owner of a cleaning and restoration business that has a lot going for it. His company's been in business long enough, and they've done nice enough work over the years to enjoy a good reputation and a loyal customer following. His business is located in a market area that has plenty of population to support future growth, and he has a dedicated group of employees working for him.

Jake has always been open to finding new ways to grow his company. He tries the newest marketing strategies he reads about, invests in the latest technology, and makes sure his people are well-trained. In spite of all this, his company hasn't grown measurably for the last couple years. Some of his people are getting concerned that there might not be a rewarding future for them at the company if things don't change.

If Jake's company sounds like yours, any similarity is purely coincidental. However, I've known a lot of business owners like Jake in the years I've been consulting, and the underlying reasons why they struggle to grow their companies rarely have to do with market conditions or the economy.

There have always been similarities with the Jakes I've known: they told anyone who would listen about their grand dreams for the business, the number of trucks they wanted to have, the dominant market position they would enjoy, and all the money they would make. But just as with the Jake in this story, many of them fell far short of their dreams—and certainly short of their potentials.

After watching how companies with far less going for them can experience profitable growth—even when circumstances are stacked against them—while others struggle to get beyond what a handful of employees can produce by themselves, it becomes clear that market size, economic conditions, and other outside influences play only minor roles in determining a company's ultimate success. In my experience, the leading contributors to a company's rate of growth and success lie within the mind of the business owner.

As you might imagine, these contributors are almost infinite in their variety, and none are either good or bad or right or wrong. They are simply contributing factors to the growth and eventual size an entrepreneur grows his company. At the same time, most of them fall into six broad categories: I'm comfortable where I am, I'm afraid of failing, I'm afraid of succeeding, I don't think I'm deserving, I don't think I'm capable, or I don't know how.

It's not uncommon to have more than one of these types of contributors at play at the same time. Sometimes they'll even develop dependent relationships on each other, such as when someone is feeling comfortable with conditions as they exist, they can be driven by their fear of failing if they try new things. Or they don't feel they're capable of growing the company because they don't know how to get to the next level.

Over the next several weeks I'll investigate each of these categories in depth and explore how they can affect the growth of a company.