

“I held myself solely responsible for the success of the business”

Leadership coach Sarah Hawke reflects on the lessons she learned from failing to delegate and trying to be everything to everyone in her last role as CEO

For 12 years before becoming a leadership coach, I was CEO of a children's home, school and therapeutic services business bought and run by myself and my partner. I believed I was personally responsible for the overall success of the organisation and that it could stand or fall on my efforts. I felt that I should be everything to everyone, and this proved to be my biggest mistake.

I led the senior management team, providing strategic leadership, managing stakeholder relationships, ensuring financial stability/profitability, and promptly and sufficiently completing all operational business tasks while meeting stringent legal requirements. But I also bought the black biro for the staff, cleared rubbish from the grounds and checked which light bulbs needed replacing. I prided myself on doing all the jobs required for keeping the business running, believing that other leaders would follow my example. At the time, I thought these were the usual behaviours and actions of a CEO of a business with 30 staff and healthy annual turnover.

“My mental and physical health began to be affected”

When we sold and exited the business, I finally had the head space to reflect on my role, actions and leadership style, and realised the mistakes I had made in the job I had assumed for myself. I did not delegate effectively and instead exempted staff and other leaders from their own responsibilities. This was not because I didn't trust them, but because I thought I needed to support and protect their health, wellbeing and levels of work-related stress above everything. I took the lead and managed problematic and challenging situations, not all the time, but often enough for me to understand that I had in fact allowed people who were employed by us to take responsibility for leading and managing to remove and absolve themselves when they had needed to lead from the front. At the time, I thought the way I was acting was the right approach to take. It was only when my mental and physical health began to be affected that I realised my fixation on being the solution to all problems was not overly effective, and I had created a persona that I no longer wanted to be.

As a CEO/leader, the art of delegation is key and one that you may need to learn and practise if it does not come easily to you. Learning to say 'no' and setting out your approach to leadership and what you will and will not tolerate from your leadership team



is critical from the start. And get someone else to buy the stationery – you really do not need to do this.

What this taught me was that in my next business I need the only person I am responsible for to be myself. I make the decisions, set the direction for the future and manage the pressures of owning a business.

I may seek another senior leadership position in the future, but my approach would be different. I would set absolute clarity in my expectations of others, ensure the scope of other leaders' roles are understood and not allow myself to act and feel as if I am responsible for the successes of everyone and everything.