

# How to Thrive with Adult ADD / ADHD

by

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## Class 9: Entrepreneurship and ADD / ADHD

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**NOTE:** *Although this material is presented in terms of business ownership and entrepreneurship, the issues and strategies provided are equally valid for anyone working for themselves, running a franchise, operating an satellite office, or working freelance.*

### ADDers Tend to be Entrepreneurial

A disproportionately large percentage of people who are ADD / ADHD have chosen to go into business for themselves, compared to those without ADD. That's because many of the qualities that attract entrepreneurs are traits commonly associated with ADD.

#### Why ADDers are attracted to entrepreneurship:

- Passion (hyper-focus) – Strong desire to devote all your time and attention to developing your business
- High tolerance for risk – Entrepreneurs need to be able to live with ambiguity
- Need for independence (do things your own way) – Not being able to fit into others' way of doing things leads to desire to create your own business
- Good ideas (creativity) – Creating something that hasn't been done before, or done in this way
- Multiple skills – Running a business requires talents in many areas, with a day full of variety

- Ability to multi-task – Need to switch gears quickly, or put out several fires at once when you're in charge of everything

## Typical Entrepreneurial Pitfalls

Unfortunately, the reasons many entrepreneurial ventures fail are also similar to ADD-type challenges:

### ***Why many entrepreneurial ventures fail:***

- Selective attention – just paying attention to the aspects of business that you like, rather than everything involved in running a business
- Poor management / delegation – trying to do everything yourself, and/or not paying attention to responsibilities that are delegated to others
- Poor follow-through – starting a project and letting it drop, forgetting to see all the stages of it
- Inattention to details – being undermined by small, but important, details
- Impulsivity / premature action – taking action without planning or thinking through consequences
- Inability to prioritize / hyper-focus on the wrong things – paying overly intense attention to parts of the business that are unimportant, letting more important areas lapse
- Perfectionism – focusing on perfection in areas that aren't justified based on the time and cost

### ***Lessons learned from the dot-coms***

Many believe the dot-com industry leadership was ADD-intensive, which contributed to both the industry's success and its rapid failure in the late '90's.

*Highly creative programmers had some great ideas for software and Internet products, and pursued them avidly. They paid little or no attention to business models, profitability, marketing, human resources, management skill – or most aspects of running a sustainable business. The attention and hyper-focus was very selective, and was placed on the wrong priorities for long-term growth.*

# What's Required to Build a Business

## VISION

The business must start with a vision to hold your focus and move you forward. The vision should be clear as to the purpose of the venture, what product or service will be produced or provided, what the benefits are, to whom, and how it will be delivered.

Goals stemming from the vision should be put to the “SMART” test: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-Bound.

The vision should be the guide for all plans regarding the business. If an action doesn't fit in with the vision, it should not be pursued—unless the vision needs to be revisited and modified.

## *ADD Challenges*

### **Sustaining Focus and Interest**

- ADDers get excited easily and lose interest quickly. The vision should be used to hold your focus and move you forward. If you lose interest in the venture, you might tend to change the vision frivolously, or forget about it. This would be very confusing to staff and customers.
- ADDers tend to get side-tracked by tangents that are enticing, but may not fit into the vision and purpose of the enterprise. When this happens, time and resources are wasted.

## *Recommended Strategies*

- Make sure your day and week is filled with a variety of activities directed towards your business goal. Don't over-work your attention span on any one activity for too long at a time.
- Keep the key points of your vision written where you can see them easily, and refer to the vision when you find yourself tempted to follow a new direction that might just be a tangent.

- Have a trusted friend or colleague who will act as your advisor “on call.” When you’re tempted to go off in a new direction, call and run the idea by him / her first.

## **PLANNING & STRUCTURE**

A business plan is needed to determine the feasibility, strategy, and success factors for the business. You’ll want to know how the product will be created, delivered, and stored. You may need timetables for deliverables and expected return on investment. You’ll have to think about how administrative tasks will get done, and whether they will require staff or outsourcing.

A mental structure needs to be in place so that every decision isn’t made in the spur of the moment. Some analytical, detailed thinking is required.

### ***ADD Challenges***

#### **Impulsivity**

- ADDers often hate to plan, and resist structure. This is what may have motivated them to start their own business in the first place. However, without any structure, most ADDers will procrastinate, or only work on things that interest them. While impulse or intuition can be strengths in certain breakthrough business decisions, one can’t run a whole business this way.

#### **Attention to Detail**

- ADDers are more often big-picture thinkers than detail thinkers. While calculating the exact cost of an administrative service or analyzing different options of phone lines may not be very interesting to the entrepreneur, ignoring these things could prove costly. Some details may be the difference between a product or service that is profitable versus barely breaking even. Others may involve critical permits or documentation that is required to go forward.

#### **Prioritizing**

- Many ADDers have a hard time figuring out priorities. Someone who has this challenge, when faced with many decisions to make at once, will feel overwhelmed and shut down, or may arbitrarily make the wrong decision. They may hyper-focus on details that

interest them (determining the exact shade of red to be used in the logo) and ignore those that don't (getting quarterly taxes in on time to avoid a penalty).

### ***Recommended Strategies***

- Get help from someone who is good at planning. This person doesn't necessarily have to be an expert in your business, but simply someone who will play "devil's advocate" and ask the right questions to make sure you're thinking everything through. This could be a friend, colleague, consultant, MBA intern or business coach.
- When the details are important, have an expert check your work. This person could be an "expert" at punctuation, proof-reading, accounting, or the business facts.
- Work closely with a short and long-term calendar, to plot out all the steps required to meet your goals and deadlines. If you feel overwhelmed at prioritizing, ask someone to help talk you through it.
- Develop a habit of checking your calendar on a regular basis to make sure you're not ignoring critical stages of your plan.

### **WORKERS / STAFF**

Roles will need to be filled in many areas. While the entrepreneur might be able to handle everything himself in the beginning, there comes a time when opportunities are lost because one person can no longer handle everything in a timely manner. It is not practical to think that any one person is highly skilled (or has the time!) to juggle production, distribution, sales, marketing, administration, accounting, customer service, technology, etc.

While in the past, delegation may have required hiring full-time staff, it's likely that many functions can first be out-sourced, or handled on a free-lance basis several hours a week by independent contractors. Both staffing and supervising contract workers require people-skills and an ability to give direction on delegated tasks.

## ***ADD Challenges***

### **Delegation**

- ADDers are notoriously poor at delegating. In the equation of “*Do, Dump or Delegate,*” ADDers most often tend to hang on to doing everything themselves. When they do let something go to someone else, they may “dump” it completely, forgetting that they still are ultimately responsible.

### **Black / White Thinking**

- Many ADDers tend to have an “all or nothing” approach to problems. That can mean if someone feels overwhelmed, but can’t afford to hire help while his business is starting up, he may assume there’s no way to delegate anything.

### **People-Management**

- ADDers are often accused of being tactless, not being aware of the way their words affect other people. Some ADDers miss the nuances of communication, and may hurt others’ feelings. Or they get caught up in work or deadlines and forget the niceties of business communication.

### **Follow-Through**

- One aspect of good follow-through is communication to tie up any loose ends. ADDers may forget to send a “thank you” email or acknowledge receipt of a service where a vendor has gone beyond the call of duty in a crisis. Although it may not be mentioned, these kinds of oversight cause ill feelings and break down loyalty. When staff feels unappreciated, it adds to costly turnover.

### **Impulsivity**

- Although ADDers are very intuitive, they don’t always listen to their intuition, or they may rely on “hunches” when analytical thinking would be more prudent. This is especially the case in hiring, where bringing on someone who isn’t a good fit for the job or the organization can be disastrous.

## ***Recommended Strategies***

- Question your assumptions about delegating. As soon as it becomes clear that you are trying to take on too much by yourself, ask yourself:
  1. *“How much is my time worth, and can someone else do this cheaper and more efficiently?”*
  2. *“How much am I losing in opportunity cost by doing everything myself?”* For example, if spending 3 hours filing is keeping you from submitting a timely sales proposal that could net you thousands of dollars, it makes more sense to hire someone to file!
- Brainstorm all the different ways you can get someone to help in areas where you are struggling.
  - Barter can be an excellent solution for certain tasks. For example, you might be able to barter a skill or service that you provide in exchange for getting an attorney to help you file for a brand trademark.
  - Internship opportunities can be a way to get help from students majoring in areas of expertise such as accounting, business planning, website design or advertising. Students are eager to get relevant job experience on their resume and may work for little or no pay.
- Consider your people-management skills. Would you like to work for you? Do you tell people who work for you what they’re doing right? Are you giving them the amount of direction or training that they need to do the job... or are you perhaps overseeing them too much? If you’re not sure, ask them!
- Be frank about the areas where you’re weak, and need others to be strong. It’s far more powerful to be upfront about your tendency to be forgetful or disorganized, than to try to cover it up. (And if it’s true, they’ll notice it anyway!) If your staff or partners are weak in the same ways that you are, they may not be a good fit for working with you.
- Learn how to interview and hire based on the competencies (knowledge, skills and personal attributes) required for the job. This is critical whether you’re hiring an employee, or a part-time contractor. The personal attributes of your worker may be the most important component of their success in working with you. Your strengths and those of your staff need to complement each other.

- If follow-through is something you tend to forget, go over the steps with someone in advance, and put them in your calendar. Someone acting as your coach can help with this, or a good administrative assistant. .

## **YOUR PRODUCT or SERVICE: Production & Delivery**

Products need to be produced and stored. Customers need to be able to find out about your product or service (marketing); be motivated to purchase it (advertising / promotion); and be able to find it and obtain it (distribution)

There are a myriad of details in each one of these activities. Usually someone starting out in a business isn't aware in the beginning of how many different skills and types of knowledge are needed.

### ***ADD Challenges***

#### **Poor Time Sense / Over-Promising**

- ADDers tend to gloss over the complexity of what it takes to get to the final stages of delivery. This may be from not thinking through all the steps involved, or from having a poor time sense. It can lead to over-commitment and making promises that can't be acted upon. Broken commitments will quickly turn off customers and affect vendor relationships.

#### **Follow-Through**

- ADDers who are attracted to "making the deal" might fall short when it comes to servicing the customer, or remembering to check up on the client's satisfaction at a later date. These little niceties can make a big difference in repeat business and referrals.

### ***Recommended Strategies***

- Develop your time sense! Work with a coach to consciously become aware of how long things take, and how many steps are required. You can use the Time Sense Exercise explained in Class 3 of this Teleseminar Series.

- Schedule meetings with people involved in the processes that are necessary to deliver your product or service. Take notes and ask questions to make sure you gain a real understanding of the realities they face when you make a promise.
- Develop an organizing system that will ensure that you take the desired follow-up steps, to make sure nothing falls through the cracks. If necessary, get the help of a professional coach or organizer who can work with you to set up a system that you're likely to follow. It might be technology-based, or simply an old-fashioned daytime planner – whatever will work best for you.

## FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Inadequate funding has been the downfall of many ventures. You need a plan, and a back-up plan, taking several different scenarios into account. A realistic understanding of how long it most likely will take to become profitable is required, before you plunge in.

### *ADD Challenges*

#### **Over-Optimism**

- ADDers may shy away from thinking negatively, and assume the most positive possibility will come to pass – without planning how to survive if profitability takes longer than expected.

#### **Impatience**

- ADDers may veer off-course or lose interest if the money isn't coming in as fast as projected. Impatience leads to poor decisions and crisis management. Impatience can also undermine doing “due diligence” to determine all the steps required to start up – which may require more money than originally anticipated.

#### **Impulsivity**

- Impulse spending can break your budget. You not only should have a plan, but need to stick to it – or at least analyze new spending opportunities in light of the vision and budget.

## Recommended Strategies

- Run your business assumptions through a reality test. Ask a colleague or friend to play “devil’s advocate” with you, and challenge you on what would happen if your plans didn’t work as expected. Do you have a “Plan B?”
- Have a Board of Advisors who will help you guard against impulsive decisions. These might be trusted colleagues whose judgment you respect, and who will ask you the difficult questions when you want to veer off-course in your spending.

## Critical Success Factors for ADD Entrepreneurs

ADDers – more than other people – need to consider the following into their equation when considering their business.

- **Environment**
- **People**
- **Planning**
- **Structure / Organization**

## ENVIRONMENT

Your working environment can make or break your ability to focus. Whether you focus best with some activity humming around you, or you require total quiet and a closed door to concentrate – if you are attempting to fit into an environment that works against you, you won’t focus as well. As an entrepreneur, you may have more control over your environment than you would as an employee.

***Potential Pitfall Alert!*** *Don’t count on doing all your work in your home unless you know you work well there. Be especially cautious about creating a home office in an isolated area of your home, such as the basement. People with ADD have a tendency to succumb to drifting thoughts, addictive internet surfing or depression under isolated working conditions. You may do better to work at a café or to rent part-time office space on another firm’s premises.*

## PEOPLE

Working with people whose strengths and weaknesses complement your own is critically important. You need to have people you can count on to delegate to – and with whom you can speak openly about areas where you expect *them* to take the lead.

If your area of weakness is writing, for example, you should require excellent writing, spelling and punctuation from your administrative assistant. Have someone you can count on to help you analyze your hiring and contracting needs with staff. You must involve someone who can be truthful with you, and point out weaknesses that you may not realize you have.

**Managing** - Manage people based on their needs for the specific task. People need varying degrees of supervision / direction or coaching, based on how competent and experienced they are in a particular task. Even if they've done the task before, they will need direction if they're new at learning how to do it YOUR way. Giving too little direction is as detrimental to effective delegation as micro-managing.

**Hiring** - In hiring, a job candidate's past performance is the best indicator of their future performance. When determining whom to hire in any capacity, determine the candidate's knowledge, skills and personal attributes by asking them about similar past situations. Ask questions that begin: “*Tell me about a time when you...*” that determine their past performance rather than “*How would you handle it if...*” which only tests their imagination.

***Potential Pitfall Alert!*** *Don't count on your gut reaction or intuition as your primary criteria when hiring someone.* *Studies have shown that the interviewer's “good feeling” about a hiree is historically a very poor predictor of their work performance. People you like best on first meeting may be those who share the same weaknesses and traits as you, and may be ADD themselves. Instead, ask interview questions that determine how the person has worked in the past to determine if they have the knowledge, skills and personal attributes that you require.*

## PLANNING

Weaknesses in planning, timing, and/or organization are typical of ADDers. People who advise you may not realize this, and suggest strategies to you that you'll find difficult to carry out, or see

no need for. If you have difficulty in these areas, you'd do best to have someone working closely with you who can compensate.

Relying on your own instincts or impatience can cost you greatly, if your tendency would be to plan inadequately.

***Potential Pitfall Alert!*** Leave time for planning as your first priority. Whenever you think you “don’t have time to plan,” you’re assuming you DO have time to redo your work to correct the mistakes that were made the first time. If you have a tendency to miss deadlines or take longer at projects than you expected, automatically leave much more time in your schedule than you think you should.

## ORGANIZING STRUCTURE

Unlike non-ADDers who may be more internally organized, you require some kind of deliberate organizing structure to keep you on task, focused and moving forward. This may be a special way you plan your activities, or habitual rituals that you work out to get you started right, or help you remember your obligations and appointments.

If you have come from a corporate environment, or had not previously set up a business on your own, you may be unaware that you have a challenge in this area. It’s a good idea to ask yourself what kind of system you’ll use to keep track of day-to-day appointments and activities, as well as long-term plans and obligations.

It doesn’t matter if your processes involve technology or are on paper. It only matters that they work for you. An ADHD Coach can be particularly helpful in working with you to set up a system that you’ll be likely to follow.

(You may want to use the **Strategic Intention Calendar** template included in Class 7 to record stages of activity for planning long term goals and projects.)

***Potential Pitfall Alert!*** Don’t rely on your memory in place of an organized process. Use check lists, notes, reminders and your calendar to keep track of commitments and appointments. Use rituals for planning and checking your plans until doing so becomes a habit. The processes you use for organizing your work will be at least as important as

*the business itself. Without structure, the most brilliant business plan is worthless. With structure, you can accomplish anything!*

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## **PRACTICE**

These suggested assignments are optional.

### **What traits of yours could be a concern in running a business?**

- For each trait that you've listed, what strategies would work for you to avoid problems?

### **IF YOU ARE RUNNING A BUSINESS NOW, OR CONTEMPLATING ONE:**

#### **Is your environment helping or hurting your success?**

- What can you do about it?

#### **Are you managing or delegating as effectively as you could?**

- Are you getting what you need from people that you've hired / contracted with?
- Do they have the right knowledge, skills and personal attributes for the job?

#### **Would planning better help your business run more smoothly?**

- What aspects of planning are you having trouble with?
- How could improving your time sense or creating rituals and habits help?

#### **What structure, systems or processes do you have in place?**

- If you feel disorganized, what have you tried, and why hasn't it worked?