Why Brilliant Businesses Work

What most entrepreneurs miss, and what separates the exceptional from the merely good

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There is a particular kind of entrepreneur I find most interesting. Not the one who is struggling to survive, though I have enormous respect for that fight. Not the one who has achieved a comfortable level of success and is content to stay there. The one I mean is the entrepreneur who wants to build something exceptional. Something people talk about. A business that leads its industry rather than follows it. A business with the kind of margins and reputation that reflect genuine mastery, not just adequate execution.

I have spent a long time studying what separates those businesses from the rest. And what I have found is not what most people expect. It is not strategy in the conventional sense. It is not systems, though systems matter. It is not hustle, mindset, or even talent, though all of those play a role. What separates the genuinely exceptional business is the depth of development of the person leading it, and the quality of their understanding of what a business actually is.

This paper is about both of those things.

Three Domains, Three Different Games

If you want to build a brilliant business, you need to develop across three distinct domains. Most people conflate these domains, which is part of why brilliance is so rare. The three are entrepreneurship, leadership, and business. They are related but they are not the same thing, and the level of development required in each is not equal.

Entrepreneurship is the innermost domain. It is about the person. It encompasses your capacity to read the world accurately, to navigate your own mood as a navigational instrument rather than a weather event, to think strategically, to design with elegance, to cherish the people you serve, and to create offers that are genuinely worth making. When these capacities are developed together, something becomes visible in the entrepreneur that is usually called charisma. People experience it as compelling. But charisma is not a personality trait. It is the natural expression of a person who has developed deeply across the things that actually matter. It is teachable, not as performance, but as genuine development.

Leadership is the middle domain. It is about your capacity to transmit your vision, to build genuine commitment in others rather than mere compliance, to create an environment where people do their best work because they want to, not because they are managed into it. You cannot scale a vision you cannot transmit. And you cannot transmit it without genuine human leadership capacity. This is where the deepest work of the entrepreneur intersects with the people around them.

Business is the third domain. And here is the thing most people get wrong: you do not need to be masterful at business to build a brilliant business. You need to be competent. You need a solid business system that creates structure, accountability, and rhythm. You need to understand what that system is actually doing beneath the surface. But the obsessive energy that most entrepreneurs pour into business optimization is often misplaced. The ceiling is not raised by better business mechanics. It is raised by deeper entrepreneurial and leadership development.

A good business system handled well frees you to do the work that actually produces brilliance. That is its function. The question is whether you understand what your business system is actually doing, because that understanding is what allows you to use it with genuine mastery rather than mechanical compliance.

What a Business Actually Is

My teacher Toby Hecht, who studied and worked with the philosopher Fernando Flores, used to say that a business is a network of commitments among human beings. I have carried that sentence for a long time, and the more I have worked with businesses, the more I believe it is the most precise and useful description of what a business actually is.

Not a machine. Not a system of tasks. Not an organizational chart. A network of commitments among human beings.

Work gets done because people make requests of one another and respond to those requests. Promises are made and either fulfilled or broken. Coordination happens through language, through conversation, through the ongoing dance of human beings trying to act together toward a shared purpose. Performance is not primarily a function of effort or intelligence or even talent. It is a function of the quality of the commitments that are made, and how reliably they are fulfilled over time.

This is not how most businesses are taught or managed. Most business thinking treats the organization as a machine: inputs, outputs, processes, metrics. That framing has utility. It allows you to think about efficiency and optimization in ways that produce real results. But it also hides something important. It hides the fact that the machine is made of people, and people operate through commitment, not mechanism. When the commitment structure is healthy, the machine runs. When it is broken, no amount of mechanical optimization will fix it.

Once you see this, you cannot unsee it. And it changes how you look at everything, including your business system.

The Business System as a Commitment System

A good business system works. That is not a trivial observation. Most frameworks produce activity. A genuinely good business system produces traction, and for many companies, that distinction is the difference between surviving and not. The question worth asking, and rarely asked, is why a good business system works.

The common explanations point to discipline, accountability, clarity, and cadence. All of that is accurate. But those explanations describe what happens. They do not explain why a good system reliably works across such different environments, even when the people using it do not fully understand what they are doing.

The deeper answer is this: a good business system works because it operationalizes the commitment structure of the organization. It makes commitments visible, public, and trackable. It creates rhythm around whether promises are being kept. It surfaces breakdowns before they become crises. It forces behaviors that align with effective human coordination, even if the participants have no language for what they are actually doing.

This is both the great strength of a good business system and its inherent limit. It gets companies moving in the right direction quickly, without requiring a deep philosophical shift at the outset. Most people can implement a business system before they understand it. And for many companies, implementation alone produces remarkable improvement.

But implementation without understanding has a ceiling. At some point, the difference between companies that achieve genuine excellence and those that plateau at solid performance comes down to whether the people leading the business understand what their system is actually doing. Because when you understand that, you can use it with precision rather than mere compliance. And precision is where mastery lives.

To make this concrete, I want to walk through the six key components of a well-designed business system and show you what each one is doing at the level of human commitment. I will use EOS, the Entrepreneurial Operating System developed by Gino Wickman, as my example. It is the most widely adopted and carefully designed business system I know, and it is the one I implement with clients. But the principles apply to any serious business system. The point is not EOS specifically. The point is what a good system does beneath the surface, and what becomes possible when you can see it.

The Six Components, Seen Clearly

Vision: The Commitment That Precedes All Others

A business system begins with vision, and there is a reason for that. Before any commitment can be made to another person, a commitment must be made to a future. Vision is that commitment. It is the entrepreneur declaring, with enough specificity to be held accountable to it, what they intend to bring into existence and by when.

In EOS, the vision component is built around a set of tools that force this declaration into concrete language: core values, core focus, a ten-year target, a three-year picture, a one-year plan, and quarterly priorities. What these tools are doing, underneath the practical language, is helping the entrepreneur make their commitments legible. Not just to themselves but to everyone around them.

This matters more than it first appears. A vision that lives only in the leader's head cannot generate commitment in others. It can generate effort, because people will work toward what they are told to work toward. But effort without commitment is brittle. It breaks under pressure, under ambiguity, under the inevitable moments when no one is watching. What sustains a team through difficulty is shared commitment to something worth committing to. And shared commitment requires shared understanding of what is being built and why.

For the entrepreneur who wants to build something exceptional, vision is not a planning exercise. It is an act of leadership. The quality of your vision, its clarity, its ambition, its honesty, determines the quality of commitment you can generate in the people around you. Vague vision produces tentative commitment. Compelling vision produces the kind of engagement where people bring their full intelligence and creativity to the work.

The entrepreneur who has done the deep work in the entrepreneurship domain, who can read the world clearly, who operates from a generative mood, who genuinely cherishes the people they serve, will build a qualitatively different vision than the one who has not. The tools are the same. What goes into them is not.

People: Commitment Requires the Right Relationship

Not every person can make and keep commitments in every context. Some people are genuinely capable of a particular kind of work and genuinely incapable of others. Some people share the values that make commitment real in a specific culture, and others do not. The people component of a business system is about ensuring that the humans in the commitment network are the right humans for what is being built.

In EOS, this component is built around a simple but demanding framework: the right people in the right seats. Right people are those who share the core values of the organization. Right seats are those where a person has the capacity, the will, and the information to do what the seat requires. The diagnostic tools EOS provides, particularly the People Analyzer, create a structured way to have honest conversations about fit.

Seen through the lens of commitment, what these tools are doing is protecting the integrity of the commitment network. A person who does not share the core values will make commitments from a different set of concerns than the organization requires. A person in the wrong seat will make commitments they cannot keep, not from bad faith, but from genuine incapacity. Either situation degrades the quality of coordination across the entire organization.

For the entrepreneur who cherishes the people around them, this component carries genuine weight. Cherishing someone does not mean protecting them from honest assessment. It means holding their concerns as your own, which sometimes requires the difficult conversation that a person is not in the right place. Done with real care, those conversations are acts of leadership. Done with avoidance or harshness, they are failures of it.

The brilliant business is built with people who genuinely want to be there, doing work they are actually capable of, inside a culture that reflects shared values. That is not sentiment. That is the structural condition for a high-integrity commitment network.

Data: Making the Commitment Network Visible

Commitments cannot be managed if they cannot be seen. The data component of a business system exists to make the performance of the commitment network visible, consistently, without relying on opinion or mood or whoever happens to be in the room.

In EOS, this takes the form of a Scorecard: a small set of weekly numbers that give leadership a clear view of whether the business is on track. Each number is owned by a specific person, which means each number is attached to a specific commitment. When a number is off, the question is not just what happened to the metric. The question is what happened in the commitment structure that produced that result.

This is a subtle but important shift. Most organizations use data to assess performance in the abstract. A good business system uses data to assess commitment in the specific. The Scorecard does not tell you how the business is doing in some general sense. It tells you whether the people responsible for specific outcomes are delivering on what they said they would deliver. That is a very different kind of information, and it changes the nature of the conversations that follow.

For the exceptional entrepreneur, data is not about surveillance or pressure. It is about clarity. A team that has clear, shared visibility into what is working and what is not can coordinate with far greater speed and honesty than one operating from opinion and assumption. The Scorecard creates the conditions for that kind of honest coordination. What the entrepreneur brings to it is the culture in which the data can be engaged with honestly rather than defensively.

Issues: Breakdowns in the Commitment Structure

Every business system has some mechanism for identifying and resolving problems. In EOS, this is called the Issues component, built around a structured process of identifying, discussing, and solving. The IDS method, identify, discuss, solve, is clean and practical, and it works.

But seen through the lens of commitment, what an issue actually is becomes clearer and more useful. An issue is not merely a problem to be solved. It is a signal that something has broken down in the commitment structure. A project is late not because time ran out, but because somewhere a request was unclear, or a promise was made without sufficient capacity, or a breakdown occurred that was not surfaced early enough. The issue is the visible surface. The commitment breakdown is the actual thing.

This distinction matters enormously in practice. When you treat an issue as a problem to be solved, you address the symptom. When you treat it as a breakdown in human coordination, you address the source. The first approach produces resolution. The second produces learning and structural improvement. Organizations that only ever solve issues tend to see the same issues recur. Organizations that understand what issues actually are begin to redesign how they coordinate, and the issues stop coming back.

The entrepreneur who has developed their capacity to read the world clearly and to navigate mood with skill will bring something to the issues conversation that the system alone cannot provide. They will see the human dynamics underneath the presenting problem. They will address breakdowns with care rather than blame. And they will use each issue not just as something to resolve, but as information about where the commitment network needs strengthening.

Process: Commitments Made Repeatable

Process is how the business keeps its most important commitments without requiring heroic individual effort every time. A well-documented, consistently followed process is essentially a standing commitment: this is how we do this, reliably, regardless of who is doing it.

In EOS, the process component asks leadership to identify the core processes of the business, document them simply and clearly, and ensure they are followed by everyone. The emphasis is on consistency. Not perfection, not elaborate documentation, but the kind of shared understanding that allows people to coordinate without constant supervision.

Seen as a commitment tool, process does something elegant. It moves commitment from the individual to the organization. When a process is well designed and consistently followed, the quality of the customer experience, the reliability of the delivery, the consistency of the culture does not depend on any one person having a good day. It is built into how the organization operates. That is a form of commitment integrity that individual heroism can never achieve at scale.

For the entrepreneur who cares about building something exceptional, process is the mechanism by which their standards become the organization's standards. The quality they hold privately becomes the quality the team delivers consistently. But this only works if the processes themselves are designed from genuine understanding of what matters and why. Process without that understanding produces bureaucracy. Process with it produces excellence.

Traction: The Discipline of Keeping Your Word

Traction is where the commitment structure becomes most explicit. This component is built around two tools: Rocks and the Level 10 Meeting. Together, they create the operational rhythm by which the business makes and tracks its most important commitments on a quarterly and weekly basis.

A Rock, in the EOS language, is a 90-day priority. Something important that must be accomplished in the quarter. That is how it is presented, and the metaphor is accessible and useful. But a Rock is actually a promise. When someone owns a Rock, they are making a commitment to the rest of the leadership team that something will be accomplished by a certain date. They are giving their word in public, with accountability built into the structure.

This is the metaphor versus precision distinction at its most visible. The metaphor, a Rock, gets people moving. It is accessible and not intimidating. But when someone truly understands that owning a Rock means giving their word to these people, that their credibility and the trust of the team is bound up in it, the entire relationship to the Rock changes. Clarity improves. Ownership becomes real. Follow-through stops being about discipline and starts being about integrity.

The Level 10 Meeting operates the same way. It is not merely a meeting format with a prescribed agenda. It is a structured space for coordinating commitments on a weekly basis. What was promised last week? What was delivered? Where are the breakdowns? What needs to be addressed? The rhythm of the L10 creates a regular, public accounting of whether the commitment network is functioning, and it does so in a way that builds trust and culture over time when it is conducted with the right spirit.

I have watched many leadership teams struggle with EOS at this level. The Rocks exist but feel like a performance. The L10 meetings happen but lack honesty or sharpness. The system is in place but the results are mediocre. In almost every case, the issue is not the tools. It is that the team is relating to commitments as tasks, not as acts of integrity. The moment that shifts, the system comes alive.

Why Some Companies Get More From the Same System

If you have implemented a business system, or watched others do it, you have almost certainly noticed something puzzling. Two companies can implement the same system with similar discipline and produce very different results. One gets genuine traction. The other goes through the motions. The tools are identical. The process is similar. And yet the outcomes diverge significantly.

The explanation is not mysterious once you understand what a business system is actually doing. The companies that get the most from a business system are the ones whose leaders understand, at some level, that they are operating a commitment structure. They may not use that language. But they bring to their Rocks, their meetings, their data, and their people decisions a quality of seriousness and care that reflects genuine understanding of what is at stake.

The companies that struggle are the ones whose leaders are implementing a system without internalizing it. They follow the practices, but they do not transform their relationship to commitment, to language, to the human beings around them. So the system becomes mechanical. The Rocks are tasks. The meetings are rituals. The Issues are problems. And nothing really changes because the underlying commitment culture has not shifted.

This is where the entrepreneurship and leadership domains intersect with the business domain in a decisive way. A business system is a mechanism. The quality of what flows through it is determined by the quality of the human beings using it and the depth of their understanding of what they are doing. The mechanism can improve anyone. But only the entrepreneur who has done the deeper work can push through the ceiling that the mechanism alone cannot break.

The Entrepreneurship Domain: Where Brilliance Is Built

A brilliant business begins with a brilliant entrepreneur. Not brilliant in the sense of innate genius, but brilliant in the sense of genuinely developed across the capacities that actually determine the quality of what gets built. Those capacities are worth naming directly, because they are not what most entrepreneurial development programs focus on.

Reading the world is the first and most foundational. You cannot build something exceptional if your perception of the market, the customer, and your own business is significantly distorted. And most entrepreneurs are operating with more distortion than they realize. The interpretations we stand in, about what customers want, about what competitors are doing, about what our team is capable of, about what is possible in our industry, shape everything we do. Developing the capacity to see more clearly, to notice your own interpretive filters and question them, is not a soft skill. It is the prerequisite for genuine strategy.

Mood is the second capacity, and it is the one most consistently underestimated. Mood is not an emotional state you experience and then act despite. Mood is the medium in which you operate. It determines what possibilities you can see, what actions occur to you, what kind of presence you bring to the people around you. An entrepreneur in resignation cannot read the market with openness. An entrepreneur in anxiety makes defensive decisions. An entrepreneur in genuine ambition and care sees what others miss and generates commitment in the people around them almost effortlessly.

Developing mood as a navigational instrument means learning to notice what mood you are in, understanding how it is shaping your perception and action, and developing the capacity to shift it intentionally. This is also what allows you to sustain the journey. Persistence, in the conventional sense, is a willpower concept. It implies grinding through difficulty on the strength of discipline alone. What actually sustains exceptional entrepreneurs is not persistence but the capacity to navigate their own inner weather. When mood is a tool rather than a condition, breakdown does not produce collapse. It produces information.

Strategy, in this context, is not a planning exercise or a competitive analysis framework. It is the capacity to see clearly enough to make genuine choices about where to focus and what to build. Strategy without clear perception is guesswork. Strategy without honest assessment of your own capabilities is fantasy. Strategy grounded in clear seeing and honest self-knowledge is one of the most powerful tools an entrepreneur has.

Design is the capacity to intentionally create the structures, experiences, and offers that produce the outcomes you intend. A business is not something that happens to you. It is something you design. The commitment network, the culture, the customer experience, the team dynamics, all of these are designed, consciously or unconsciously. The entrepreneur who designs consciously, with skill and care, builds something qualitatively different from the one who lets it emerge reactively.

Cherishing is the capacity to hold another person's concerns as though they were your own. My teacher Toby Hecht gave me this distinction, and I have found it to be one of the most load-bearing ideas in my entire body of work. Cherishing is not warmth or niceness, though both may be present. It is a structural orientation toward the other person's genuine flourishing. When an entrepreneur cherishes their customers, the offers they create are fundamentally different in quality and honesty from those created from a primarily transactional orientation. When they cherish their team, the commitment they generate is of a different order. Cherishing is not charity. It is the foundation of the kind of trust that makes genuine commitment possible.

Creating offers worth making is where all of the other capacities converge. An offer, in the deepest sense, is not a product or a service. It is an invitation into a future that did not previously exist. The most compelling offers come from entrepreneurs who see clearly enough to recognize a genuine need, care deeply enough to design something that actually addresses it, and are honest enough to promise only what they can deliver. Those offers create markets rather than compete within them. They attract customers who become advocates and team members who become genuinely invested. That is how brilliant businesses are built.

When these capacities are present and developed together, the entrepreneur becomes what the market experiences as compelling. They are called charismatic, and that word is both accurate and misleading. It is accurate because there is something genuinely magnetic about a person operating at that level. It is misleading because it implies an innate quality rather than a developed one. What looks like charisma from the outside is the natural expression of someone who has done the work of genuine entrepreneurial development. It is available to anyone willing to do that work.

What This Opens Up

Get your business system in place and run it well. EOS, or any serious equivalent, will give you the structure, the rhythm, and the visibility you need to operate with discipline and consistency. That alone will move most businesses significantly forward, and it is genuinely valuable work.

But do not stop there. Understand what your system is actually doing. See the Rocks as promises, the meetings as coordination conversations, the issues as breakdowns in the commitment network, the data as a window into whether commitments are being kept. That understanding will not change the tools. It will change how your people relate to the tools, and that changes everything.

And then do the deeper work. Develop your capacity to read the world clearly. Learn to navigate your mood as an instrument rather than experience it as weather. Design with intention. Cherish the people around you with genuine structural commitment, not sentiment. Build offers that are worth making because they are grounded in honest perception and real care.

That is not a different path from building a great business. It is the path. The brilliant businesses I have seen, the ones that lead their industries, that have the margins and the reputation and the culture that others can only aspire to, were built by entrepreneurs who understood this, whether they had this language for it or not.

You want to build something exceptional. A business that reflects the quality of what you know you are capable of. A business that makes a genuine difference and rewards you and your team generously for doing so. The system gets you in the game. What you bring to it determines how far you go.

The question is not whether you have the right system.

The question is whether you are becoming the entrepreneur that system is waiting for.