

# Breaking Through the Plateau

## The journey - From Founder to Leader and from Tactics to Strategy



*[This is the text version of this story. If you prefer to listen to an audio version, there is an audio version accessible here.](#)*

Every successful business faces a moment of truth. Not the dramatic kind you see in films—no hostile takeovers, no market crashes, no scandal. Something quieter. More insidious. The business simply... stops growing.

The phones still ring. Orders still come in. Staff still turn up each morning. But the energy that once propelled everything forward has somehow dissipated. Growth has plateaued. And the founder—the person who built this entire enterprise from nothing—finds themselves working harder than ever while achieving less and less.

This is the story of one such moment.

Brad Mitchell built Advanced Precision Engineering from an idea into an £11 million business with eighty staff in just six years. By any measure, he succeeded. Yet success brought him to the edge of breakdown—working sixteen-hour days, losing his best people, watching his marriage strain, and drowning his anxiety in whisky at three in the morning.

What Brad didn't realise was that he wasn't facing a business problem. He was facing a leadership problem. The very behaviours that had made him successful—his drive, his hands-on approach, his ability to make every decision and close every deal—had become the chains holding his business back.

This is a story about transformation. Not of a business, but of a leader. It's about the painful recognition that what got you here won't get you there. That the greatest thing you can do for your business might be to make yourself less essential to its daily operation. That tactics must give way to strategy. That management must evolve into leadership.

It's a story many founders live through but few talk about honestly. The story of how success itself can become your prison. And how breaking free requires not just changing what you do, but fundamentally transforming who you are.

This is the journey from founder to leader. From tactics to strategy. From being the engine that drives everything to being the leader who creates clarity so that everyone can drive forward together.

Let's begin on a factory floor in the Midlands, where Brad Mitchell sits in his glass-walled office at 9:47 PM, staring at spreadsheets that tell him everything he's built is stuck. And where the hardest journey of his life is about to begin.

### **A once comfortable world**

Brad Mitchell sat in what estate agents would optimistically call his "executive office" – a corner of the factory floor separated by glass walls that still trembled when plant kicked in. Before him, spreadsheets glowed accusingly on two monitors: £11 million in revenues, eighty staff, six years of existence. To the outside world Advanced Precision Engineering was a roaring success.

So why did he feel like he was drowning?

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The early days had been intoxicating. Brad had spotted a gap in the market. The idea was simple: high-specification precision components with support that actually meant something. A genuinely responsive customer service was a radical concept in an industry where "we'll get back to you" meant "maybe next month."

And it had worked. Spectacularly!

The first two years were a blur of 80-hour weeks. In those early days Brad was everywhere: on the shop floor solving technical problems, at client sites winning deals, staying up until 2 AM to respond to enquiries from the US. He'd negotiate every deal personally, each one slightly different, tailored to win. Outplaying the bigger more established competitors with flexibility, responsiveness and passion. By year three, they were at £3 million. Year four, £7 million. Year five, £10 million with 80 staff.

Brad was the engine, the heart, the brain. His energy, his instinct for a good deal, his willingness to roll up his sleeves—that's what made it work.

But now? Now he was working harder than ever, but he felt like he was wading through treacle.

The numbers told the story his gut already knew. Growth had stalled eighteen months ago. They'd hit £11 million and simply... stopped. Worse, costs were sticky things – salaries, rent, equipment leases – they didn't care that revenues had plateaued creating a profit squeeze. Which of course in turn hit cash in a way that kept him awake at night.

His phone buzzed. Elliot, his sales director, at 10 PM: "Brad, the Hardybee contract – they want custom specs again. Can we do delivery in three weeks instead of six? Need your call on pricing."

Great - some positive cash thought Brad for a moment. Then sighed and started typing a response. Of course Elliot needed him to decide. Everyone needed him to decide everything.

Brad had tried everything. He'd hired more people – the office now felt crowded. He'd outsourced the accounts function. Taken on Geoff, a trained business coach who'd spent six sessions telling Brad exactly what to do, as if Brad were a particularly dim undergraduate. That had lasted a month before Brad's patience evaporated.

Nothing worked. He was working harder than ever – sixteen-hour days were normal now – but the business had simply stopped responding to effort. It was like pushing a boulder uphill that kept rolling back.

He rubbed his eyes and checked his watch. 9:47 PM. Again. Emma had stopped texting him to ask when he'd be home. That was somehow worse than the arguments. "Dad's missing my football match again, isn't he?" His son's voice echoed in his memory from last weekend. Emma's face. And lately, that glass of whisky when he finally got home had become two. Sometimes three. The 3 AM anxiety attacks.

Something had to change.

*Brad reflects: "I thought if I just worked harder, pushed more, everything would come right. I'd succeeded before by sheer force of will. Why wasn't it working now?"*

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### Sharing a pint

"You look absolutely terrible, mate."

Brad glanced up to see Dave Henderson settling into the chair opposite at The Crown. Dave was twenty years older, with a weathered face that suggested he'd earned every grey hair through hard experience. He'd run six businesses over forty years. For three of them he'd been specifically recruited to reinvigorate growth after a plateau.

"How's the business?" Dave asked.

"Fine. Good. Growing." The lies came automatically now.

"Hmmm. And how is it really?" Dave asked, looking at him with his steady grey eyes.

### Opening up

Brad's pause lasted approximately forty seconds. "Alright, it's not fine. Growth has stalled completely. Profitability is declining. I've tried everything. I've hired more staff, outsourced some functions, even spent a fortune on an advisor who just told me what to do constantly. Nothing's working."

"And how are you?"

"I'm shattered, Dave. Honestly, I'm working longer hours than I did in the startup phase, but I'm achieving less. Every decision lands on my desk. The team keeps coming to me for answers, and I'm running out of them."

Dave nodded slowly. "Textbook adolescent business syndrome,"

"That's not a thing," Brad said weakly.

"Oh, it's very much a thing. Your business is stuck in adolescence. You're too big to be a scrappy startup anymore, but nowhere near big enough to be a proper corporate. You're like a gangly teenager – all potential but tripping over your own feet."

Brad wanted to be offended but found he was too tired so was just sarcastic. "So what's the diagnosis, Doctor Dave?"

### The truth hurts

Dave leaned back. "The problem isn't your business, Brad. The problem is you."

That stung. Brad felt his defences rising.

"Hold on," Dave continued, raising a hand. "I don't mean you're incompetent. Quite the opposite. You built something brilliant from nothing. But the behaviours that made you successful as a startup founder are exactly the behaviours that are strangling your growth now."

"I'm listening," Brad said quietly.

"Tell me – how many decisions do you make in a typical day?"

Brad thought about it. "I don't know. Dozens? Hundreds?"

"And how many of those absolutely need to be made by you?"

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"Well... all of them come to me."

"That's not what I asked."

Brad sat with that for a moment. He'd have sipped his beer but he'd finished the pint. So he got in the next round. He appreciated the few moments pause from the conversation - He had so much going on in his head. But was equally impatient to get back to Dave and hear his thoughts.

"Here's what I see," Dave said. "You're brilliant at tactics – doing great deals, firefighting, managing everything yourself. You've got drive and energy and you make things happen through sheer force of will. That's why you succeeded as a startup. But you're running a business with eighty people now. You literally cannot manage everything yourself. There aren't enough hours in the day."

### Brilliant at tactics but ...

"When did you last take time to think about strategy?"

Actually take time out to think, I mean! When did you last work on the business rather than in it?"

Brad laughed hollowly. "Strategy? I barely have time to eat lunch at my desk. I'm managing everything. I'm finalising every deal, negotiating customer problems, sorting out operational issues. There's no time for clever strategic thinking."

### Brilliant management but ...

"And how are you as a leader?"

"I've tried hiring good managers"

"And then you interfere and tell them what to do, don't you?"

Brad winced. "Sometimes they need guidance."

"Or sometimes you can't let go. Tell me about your management team."

Brad outlined his senior team: Elliot, Laura, Alice, and Mea were talented, no question. Elliot was a brilliant salesman when motivated, but lately seemed disengaged. Laura was reliable, hard working and organised, but kept asking for sign-off on decisions Brad thought she should make herself. Alice was intellectually formidable but frustratingly independent. Mea was wonderful with people but waited for Brad's direction before acting.

"They sound talented," Dave said. "Do they make decisions without you?"

"Sometimes. But then they ask me—"

"Because you've trained them to. Look, Brad, I'm not going to tell you what to do. No one can or should decide for you what's right for you and your business - only you can decide that. But I am going to ask you to think about something."

"What if the reason your business has plateaued isn't that you need to work harder or hire more people or find a magic wand? What if it's plateaued because it can only grow as big as your leadership capacity allows?"

The words hit Brad like a physical thing.

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"So what do I do?" he asked finally.

Dave smiled. "That's the right question. But I can't tell you the answer. You're going to have to work it through yourself. I can share some stories, ask you questions, give you some frameworks to think about. But this journey? You've got to walk it yourself."

*Brad reflects: That conversation with Dave was like looking in a mirror I'd been avoiding for months. The hardest thing to accept was that I wasn't the solution anymore – I was the bottleneck. Everything I was proud of – being hands-on, being involved, making the decisions – had become the problem.*

### Too busy fighting fires to find the spark

Brad drove home with Dave's questions echoing in his head. But by the next morning, buried under 147 emails and three urgent customer issues, he'd pushed the conversation aside.

He was too busy to change. The business needed him.

Over the next few weeks, he tried to prove he could power through. He reorganised the office. He implemented new software. He hired two more salespeople.

Nothing changed. If anything, things got slightly worse.

The breaking point came when Laura knocked on his door. "Brad, I need to talk to you about Elliot. He's been looking at other opportunities."

Brad felt his stomach drop. "Has he said why?"

"He says he feels micromanaged. That you review every deal, question his pricing, override his decisions. He says he might as well be an order-taker."

"And Laura... is that how you feel too?"

She hesitated, then nodded. "Sometimes. I know you're trying to help, but it does feel like you don't trust us to make decisions."

After she left, Brad sat in silence. Then he picked up his phone and called Dave.

"I'm ready," he said. "I don't know what to do differently, but I know what I'm doing isn't working."

*Brad reflects: I spent three days being angry at Dave. How dare he suggest I was the problem? Except... Laura's face. Elliot's looking around. Maybe being brilliant at doing everything yourself is just another way of failing.*

### Provoke and motivate

Over the following weeks, Brad began meeting Dave regularly. Dave never told him what to do, he just asked questions and shared a few anecdotes and frameworks that provoked Brad to think differently and motivated him to take action.

"The great entrepreneur starts out with a Great Idea and Drive," Dave explained. "The ones that succeed during the startup phase - in getting a business established - do so because they are instinctively brilliant at tactics and management. They take opportunities, do smart deals, and make things happen."

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The problem is that to scale beyond a couple of dozen people to a few tens or hundreds of staff requires them to let go of those very behaviours that brought their initial success. They themselves need to move from being good at tactics to being just as good at strategy - and they need to move from being great managers able to get things done to being great leaders able to inspire others to do so"

They started with strategy. "Strategy is simply being clear about what market you target and what value you create for them," Dave said. "The more niche your market, the more likely you are to succeed. You don't need the whole world as customers."

Brad resisted initially. "But limiting our market means limiting growth."

"Does it? Right now you're spreading your marketing spend thinly trying to reach everyone. What if you focused? More pounds per potential customer. More specific relevance to them too. You'd stand out more!"

They analysed Brad's business. Which customers were most profitable? Which segments aligned best with the company's capabilities?

A pattern emerged. The medical device work was complex, high-margin, and relied on exactly the kind of ongoing support that Advanced Precision excelled at. High-specification aerospace likewise. The automotive work? Great revenues but lower margin, price-sensitive and often problematic.

"What if we focused primarily on medical and high-specification aerospace?" Brad said slowly.

"Now you're thinking strategically. What would need to change?"

Everything. But in a good way. Instead of every deal being different, they could develop standard product lines. Instead of Brad negotiating every contract, they could create clear pricing and policies. Instead of reacting to whatever opportunity came along, they could proactively target the right customers.

*Brad reflects: I'd always thought focus meant limitation. Dave helped me see that focus meant power. Doing fewer things brilliantly rather than many things adequately.*

### Learning to lead

If strategy was difficult, leadership was harder.

Following another little chat, Brad realised he didn't really know what motivated his team at work. Indeed he didn't really know what they enjoyed doing at work and how they wanted to develop their role and career.

It's not that he didn't know them. He had socialised a bit and knew their hobbies and interests but when it came to work the only conversations he had were about the immediate tasks. So he resolved to have proper conversations with each of his senior team. Real conversations, not just task updates. And once he managed to get them to open up, what he learnt was interesting - and useful.

Elliot wanted autonomy, to feel trusted. "I'm good at sales. But you second-guess everything. It makes me feel incompetent."

Laura revealed she'd also been thinking of leaving. "I don't feel like I can really lead. Every decision comes back to you."

Alice said bluntly, "You hired me for my brain, then want me to just implement your ideas. It's frustrating."

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Mea put it gently: "People love working here, but they're confused about priorities. We work hard but not always on the right things."

In the coffee shop later Dave helped him understand: "Leadership isn't about controlling people. It's about having a vision, communicating it effectively, and motivating the team to drive toward it. You need everyone working consistently even when you're not around."

"But how do I let go without everything falling apart?"

"Through clarity and consistency. A clear strategy - we've already worked on that. Policies so everyone does the same thing in the same circumstances. Processes so things happen the same way. Clear product offerings. And culture; behaviours everyone understands as 'the way we do things here.'"

### Being brave and asking for help

Brad called an all-hands meeting. Eighty staff crammed into the largest space they had.

"Six years ago, I started this company with an idea," he began. "And you've all helped build something extraordinary. But I've made mistakes. I've been holding us back. I've been trying to control everything because that's what worked when we were small. But we're not small anymore."

He outlined the strategy. We will focus on medical and high-spec aerospace. Standard product lines backed up with exceptional service.

"This means change. It means I need to change. I need to lead not manage. I need to step back from day-to-day decisions and focus on where we're going. I need to trust you and your managers to lead your areas. My job is to create clarity so we can all pull in the same direction."

"It won't be easy - for me. But I'm determined to make this a brilliant place to work. So I'm committed - and I need your help. I need you to challenge me when I falter and slip back into bad habits. That doesn't mean I'll be a soft touch. I'll still be striving to do what's right for the business - whether that is right and easy for me - or for you. Instead it means I need you to help me learn how to be the leader you need me to be."

After a pause, Mea started clapping. Others joined. Genuine, warm, hopeful.

Afterwards Elliot pulled him aside. "That took guts, mate. I'm in."

### The challenge of change

The first real test came the next week. Elliot brought him a deal. A good new customer with a reasonable price expectation but with custom specifications that would add complexity.

The old Brad would have made it work. The new Brad asked: "Does this fit our strategic focus? Does it use our standard offerings?"

"Not really," Elliot admitted.

Brad took a breath. "Then I think we should decline. Politely, professionally."

Elliot looked shocked. "You want to turn down revenue?"

"I want us to focus on being brilliant at what we do best."

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After Elliot left, Brad sat at his desk, hands trembling. He'd just turned down £200,000. That went against every instinct.

He called Dave. "I just declined a deal. Tell me I'm not insane."

"You're not insane. You're being strategic. How does it feel?"

"Terrifying. Also... kind of liberating?"

*Brad reflects: "The hardest part wasn't deciding to change. It was actually changing. Every instinct screamed at me to grab the reins back. I had to actively resist my own impulses."*

### The reward

Three months in, something started shifting.

They'd developed three core product lines with clear specifications and pricing. Standard support packages. Policies and processes for how work flowed.

Elliot closed a deal in three weeks that would have taken three months before. Laura's team was making decisions without escalation. Alice had revolutionised their product development. Mea reported that staff engagement was up.

Brad found himself doing something he hadn't done in two years: thinking about the future.

He was working fewer hours but achieving more. At home, Emma noticed the difference. Lily asked if he could coach her football team on Saturdays. Six months ago, the answer would have been no. Now he said yes.

The whisky bottle remained unopened most evenings.

Old habits died hard, though. Brad caught himself three times in one week jumping into problems his team should handle.

Dave helped him develop a simple test: Before jumping in, ask three questions:

1. Is this a decision only I can make?
2. Am I jumping in because it's necessary, or because I'm uncomfortable letting go?
3. What does the person learn if I solve this for them versus if they solve it themselves?

When people brought him problems, he'd learn to ask questions rather than give solutions. "What do you think we should do? What are the options? What's stopping you?"

Initially, people looked frustrated at not having their problems answered for them. But gradually, they started coming with proposals rather than problems.

*Brad reflects: "I had to retrain my brain. My identity was wrapped up in being the problem-solver. Learning to be the person who asked good questions instead felt like losing part of myself. But actually, I was becoming someone better."*

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### Resurrection

The real test came nine months in.

A major customer requested significant custom modifications. A £400,000 contract in the old style bespoke specifications, custom pricing, dedicated resources.

The old Brad would have made the decision himself. And said yes. Revenue is revenue - a deal is a deal.

But this time Brad paused. He facilitated a discussion with his senior team.

"What's our strategy?" He asked Elliot not quite innocently.

"To focus on medical and high-spec aerospace with standard offerings," Elliot answered with clarity.

"Does this fit that?" said Alice provocatively.

They discussed implications. Mea noted they'd need to pull resources from developing their standard product line. "We'd create complexity with one customer operating under completely different terms from everyone else."

Laura ran the numbers. With all the customisation, the profit margin would be less than half their standard products.

Brad felt the old pull to take the deal, make it work. But he resisted.

"What do you all think we should do?"

Eventually, they reached consensus: decline the work, but maintain the relationship. Explain their strategic focus, offer alternatives, keep the door open.

"Elliot, you have the relationship. How do you want to handle the conversation?"

Elliot looked surprised. "You're letting me do it?"

"It's your account. You know them best. I trust your judgment."

The customer was disappointed but understood. They respected the clear strategic focus. Three weeks later, they came back with a different project that did fit within the standard offerings.

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### Looking back

Fifteen months after that first conversation with Dave, Brad sat in his office looking at numbers that told a different story.

Revenue was up 30% to £14.3 million. But more importantly, profitability had doubled. Staff turnover had dropped to nearly zero. Employee engagement scores were the highest they'd ever been.

They'd turned down approximately £2 million in deals that didn't fit their focus. Yet they'd grown faster than when they were chasing everything.

The senior leadership team was thriving. Elliot was running sales autonomously and brilliantly. Laura had developed an operations team that hummed with efficiency. Alice had innovated three new product variations. Mea had created a culture where people felt empowered and clear.

Brad was working normal hours. He'd coached Lily's football team to second place. He and Emma had started date nights again.

Dave stopped by for coffee. "You did it," he said simply.

"We did it," Brad corrected. "The team. I just got out of their way."

"You created clarity about where you're going. You built systems that let people operate consistently. You developed your team and empowered them. You made hard choices about focus. That's all you."

"It's weird," Brad admitted. "I feel like I'm doing less, but achieving more."

"You're doing different things. More important things. You're working on the business, not just in it. Strategy instead of just tactics. Leadership instead of just management."

Brad nodded slowly. "The business wasn't really plateauing. I was. My behaviours had stopped working. The business was waiting for me to evolve before it could evolve."

"That's the insight most business leaders never grasp," Dave said. "They keep doing what worked before, working harder and harder, wondering why it's not working. But as Einstein never said but is credited with sometimes "What got you here won't get you there!"

*Brad reflects: "I spent years trying to prove I was indispensable. Turns out the greatest thing I could do for my business was make myself dispensable. To build something that could run and grow without me controlling every detail."*

***The adolescent business phase is one of the most challenging transitions a founder faces. The very qualities that create startup success - Entrepreneurial energy, tactical brilliance, personal control - become the barriers to scaling. Breaking through requires not just new strategies and systems, but a fundamental transformation in how the leader operates.***

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### About Bob Bradley



Bob has led six businesses and three substantial SMEs with hundreds of staff and revenues of up to £50M, driving operational turnarounds, merger integrations, and fundraising for new divisions he grew to profitability.

In recent years, he's served on 18 eighteen boards, spanning the public, private, and charitable sectors. More significantly, through his own business, he has facilitated over 800 mastermind meetings with more than 300 SME leaders, creating confidential forums where they debated their thorniest leadership challenges.

Before finding his calling as an SME leader, he gained broad experience across diverse industries and cultures, -- alternating between senior consulting roles at Accenture and PwC, and hands-on work with SMEs, implementing IT systems. He has an MBA and a first-class honours degree, providing him with a solid foundation before real business taught him the practical realities.

The result? Insights into business and leadership that are unusually broad and deep, -- born from thousands of hours helping leaders navigate the messy reality.

Today, as an **author, speaker, workshop / awayday facilitator, and business coach**, his purpose is straightforward: to save clients time and money by sharing the shortcuts he's discovered and dead ends he's hit. He's made plenty of mistakes so you don't have to!

His philosophy? Real leadership wisdom comes from the trenches, not the textbooks.

*Check out Bob's recommendations at [www.linkedin.com/in/bobbradley/details/recommendations](http://www.linkedin.com/in/bobbradley/details/recommendations), review his website at [www.BobBradley.co.uk](http://www.BobBradley.co.uk) and contact him at [Bob@BobBradley.co.uk](mailto:Bob@BobBradley.co.uk).*