

The Small Business System Diagnostic

15 Questions That Reveal Whether It's You, Your People, or Your Process



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About Andy O'Neil

My name is Andy O'Neil, and I run Weblytica, a consulting practice that helps small business owners figure out where AI and automation actually make sense for their business.

I've been freelancing since 2012. I've spent a lot of time inside systems that look fine on paper but break down in practice. That taught me something important: most organizations don't have a technology problem. They have a clarity problem. They can't see where their systems are actually breaking down.

That's what I do now. I help people see what they can't see on their own.



How I Work

I don't sell software. I don't push tools. I diagnose systems.

Most of my work happens in live co-building sessions over Zoom. I've done over 800 hours of these calls, sitting with business owners and walking through their actual workflows in real time. We look at where work piles up. We find where the real bottleneck is. Then we build the fix together, right there on the call.

This isn't consulting where someone hands you a report and walks away. This is working side by side until the problem is solved and you understand exactly what we built.

What Makes This Different

I was trained as a University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service educator, which means I learned to teach by doing, not by lecturing. Extension agents rarely stand at the front of a classroom. They go out to the farm and work alongside the farmer. They teach in pickup trucks and pastures, not conference rooms.

That's the approach I bring to automation consulting. I don't give you a framework and wish you luck. I show you how to diagnose your own systems, and I build alongside you until you can do it yourself.

My Philosophy

I believe in human-first automation. The goal is never to replace people. The goal is to free them from the work that drains them so they can do the work that matters.

Before I recommend any tool or any automation, I want to understand what's actually happening in your business. Not what the org chart says. Not what the SOP document claims. What actually happens when work moves through your system.

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What You'll Get From This Diagnostic

This diagnostic comes from patterns I've seen across hundreds of co-building sessions. The same frustrations show up again and again. Business owners blame themselves for being "disorganized." They cycle through assistants and contractors. They assume they need to work harder, hire better, or find the right tool.

Almost every time, the real problem is simpler and harder to see: the system that work moves through was never actually built. It just happened.

These 15 questions will help you figure out whether you're dealing with a people problem, a "you" problem, or a system problem hiding behind both.

The 94% Insight

W. Edwards Deming spent his career studying why organizations fail. His conclusion was blunt: **94% of problems come from the system, not the people working inside it.**

In a big company, "system" means org charts, department handoffs, approval chains, and documented processes. But in a small business, "system" means something simpler and much harder to see.

Your system is how work moves from one step to the next. That's it. Who does what, in what order, with what information, and how they know when they're done.

The catch? Most small business owners have never actually built their system. It grew on its own, one workaround at a time, one "I'll just handle it myself" at a time. The system exists, but it lives entirely in the owner's head. Which means every person who touches the work is navigating a process that was never written down, never explained fully, and never designed to work without the owner in the middle of it.

When mistakes happen inside a system like that, they look like people problems. The VA missed a step. The contractor didn't follow through. You forgot to send the follow-up. But the real issue is that the system was designed to produce those exact failures. Nobody can follow a map that was never drawn.

That's what these 15 questions are designed to reveal. Not whether you have a problem (you already know that), but whether the problem is actually about people, or whether it's about a system that doesn't exist outside your head.

The 15 Diagnostic Questions

Answer each question honestly. "Yes" means this is true for your business right now. "No" means it's not. Don't answer how you'd like things to be. Answer how they actually are.

Section 1: Is the Work Visible?

These five questions reveal whether your business processes exist in the real world or only in someone's memory.

1. Could a stranger follow your instructions for your most common task without calling you for help?

Not a smart stranger. Not someone with industry experience. A reasonably competent person with no context. If they'd need to call you to fill in the gaps, the instructions aren't complete. They're notes.

- Yes, they'd need to call me
- No, it's fully documented

2. If your assistant or key team member called in sick tomorrow, could someone else do their job from what's written down?

Not "could you jump in and do it yourself." Could a *different* person pick it up from documentation alone? If the answer depends on you being available to explain things, your team member isn't the system. You are.

- Yes, we'd be stuck without them
- No, it's documented enough for a handoff

3. Do you ever say "you know what to do" instead of pointing to a document?

This is the single most common phrase in small businesses with system problems. It feels efficient. It's actually a trap. Every time you say it, you're confirming that the process lives in a conversation instead of a document.

- Yes, I say this regularly
- No, I point to written instructions

4. When something goes wrong, do you fix it yourself instead of updating the process that caused it?

Fixing the immediate problem feels urgent. Updating the process that caused it feels like a task for later. But "later" never comes, so the same mistake happens again next month, and you fix it again, and the cycle continues.

- Yes, I usually just fix the problem and move on
- No, I update the process when things break

5. Is any critical business knowledge stored only in one person's head (including yours)?

Think about your pricing logic, your client onboarding steps, your follow-up sequences, your quality checks. If any of those exist only as something one person "just knows," that's a single point of failure masquerading as expertise.

- Yes, some critical knowledge lives in one person's head
- No, everything important is documented and accessible

Section 2: Are the Handoffs Clean?

These five questions examine what happens when work passes from one person (or step) to the next. Handoffs are where most small business mistakes actually happen.

6. When work passes from one person to the next, is it clear what "done" looks like?

Not "done-ish." Not "I think it's good." Is there a specific, observable standard that both the sender and receiver agree on? If "done" means different things to different people, every handoff is a coin flip.

- Yes, "done" is vague or assumed
- No, we have clear completion standards

7. Do you find yourself re-explaining the same task more than twice a quarter?

Once is training. Twice is reinforcement. Three or more times in three months means the explanation isn't sticking because it doesn't live anywhere permanent. You're not a bad teacher. The lesson has no home.

- Yes, I keep re-explaining the same things
- No, I explain once and it sticks (or they reference the docs)

8. Does your team ask you the same questions repeatedly about the same processes?

This is the mirror image of question 7. If they keep asking, it's not because they're not listening. It's because the answer isn't stored somewhere they can access without bothering you. You've become the FAQ page for your own business.

- Yes, I get the same questions over and over
- No, they find answers on their own

9. When you delegate something, do you check it yourself before it goes out?

Some quality control is smart. But if you check *everything* before it leaves, you haven't actually delegated. You've added a step. And you've trained your team to depend on your review instead of developing their own quality standard.

- Yes, I review most things before they go out
- No, I trust the process and spot-check occasionally

10. Have you ever lost a lead, missed a deadline, or sent the wrong thing because of a gap between steps?

Not because someone was careless. Because the work moved from Point A to Point B and something fell through the crack between them. That crack is a handoff problem, and it usually means nobody owns the transition.

- Yes, things have fallen through the cracks between steps
- No, our handoffs are clean

Section 3: Is It the Person or the Pattern?

These five questions help you see whether recurring problems are about specific people or about patterns built into your workflow.

11. Have you replaced someone (VA, contractor, employee) and seen the same problems return within a few months?

This is the most revealing question in the diagnostic. If the second (or third) person hits the same walls as the first, the common variable isn't the people. It's the system they walked into. New people can't fix old process problems.

- Yes, the same problems keep showing up regardless of who's in the role
- No, personnel changes have resolved the issues

12. Do you blame yourself for being "disorganized" more than once a week?

Here's the thing about that feeling: you're probably not disorganized. You're just trying to be a system and a person at the same time, and no human being is wired to do both well. The "disorganized" feeling is often a signal that the system doesn't exist outside your head, not that something is wrong with you.

- Yes, I regularly feel disorganized or scattered
- No, I generally feel on top of things

13. When a mistake happens, is your first instinct to address the person rather than examine the workflow?

"Why did you miss that?" is a people question. "Where did the process break down?" is a system question. Both are valid. But if you default to the first one every time, you're probably solving the same problem over and over without changing the thing that caused it.

- Yes, I tend to address the person first
- No, I look at the process first

14. Could you describe your client intake process in under 60 seconds with no gaps?

Pick intake specifically because every business has one, and it's usually the first thing that breaks. If you hesitate, backtrack, or say "well, it depends," that's a sign the process has more variation and ambiguity than you realized.

- Yes, there are gaps or "it depends" moments
- No, I can walk through it clearly and completely

15. If you started your business from scratch tomorrow with the same team, would you set things up the same way?

This question bypasses all the sunk cost and habit. If the honest answer is "no, I'd do it differently," then you already know the current system isn't the right one. The question is whether you'll redesign it intentionally or keep patching what grew accidentally.

- Yes, I'd change how things are set up
- No, I'd keep the current structure

Your Score

Count up your "Yes" answers across all 15 questions.

0-4 Yes Answers: Your Systems Are Mostly Solid

Your processes are in better shape than most small businesses I work with. You have documentation, clean handoffs, and a team that can operate without you in the middle of everything. Look at the specific questions where you answered "yes" and treat those as targeted improvement areas rather than signs of a larger problem. You're fine-tuning, not rebuilding.

5-9 Yes Answers: System Problems Hiding as People Problems

This is the most common range I see. You have real processes in some areas and invisible ones in others. The frustration you feel about your team, your tools, or yourself is probably coming from the gaps between the two. Start with the handoffs (Section 2). That's where most of the actual breakdowns are happening, and fixing handoffs creates the fastest visible improvement.

10-15 Yes Answers: You ARE the System

You're the hub that every spoke connects to, and it's exhausting. Most of the "problems" in your business aren't people problems or tool problems. They're the natural result of a system that requires you to be in the middle of everything. The work can't move without you because the process for moving it doesn't exist outside your head. This isn't a criticism. It's how most small businesses grow. But it's also why they hit a ceiling. The good news: making the invisible visible doesn't require a massive overhaul. It starts with one process, written down, this week.

Three Things to Do This Week

- 1. Pick your most frustrating recurring task.** The one where mistakes keep happening. The one you keep re-explaining. The one that makes you mutter "I already told them how to do this."
- 2. Write down every step. The real ones.** Not the summary version in your head. The actual sequence: every click, every decision point, every handoff, every "and then I just know to..." moment. Those "I just know" moments are where the system lives in your head instead of in the world. That's where every new person will stumble.
- 3. Hand the document to someone and watch what happens.** Don't explain it. Don't fill in the gaps verbally. Let them follow the document. Where they get stuck tells you exactly where the system has holes. Fix those holes, and you've just built a real process out of what used to be tribal knowledge.

That's it. One task. One document. One test. Do that this week, and you'll understand more about your business systems than most owners learn in a year of frustration.

What Comes Next

The scorecard shows you where you're pushing. Sometimes that's enough. You see the mismatch, you reframe the fix at a higher level, and the path forward becomes clear.

Sometimes you need someone else to help you see what's hard to see from the inside.

Maria couldn't spot the partner approval bottleneck on her own because she was one of the partners. David couldn't see the client responsiveness issue because he'd always managed client relationships that way. Rachel couldn't trace the scope creep back to her consultation structure because she'd done consultations that way since she started.

The water you swim in is the hardest water to see.

If the audit showed that you're pushing at the wrong level, and you're not sure where the right level is, a diagnostic conversation might help.

[Book a Leverage Diagnostic Call](#)

One conversation. We map where work actually piles up in your business. We find the leverage point together. You see what your business looks like when you push in the right place.

No pitch. No pressure. Just clarity about where to push.

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