

# Sword of Damocles



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# SWORD OF DAMOCLES

**“Wherever you see a successful business, someone made a courageous decision.”**

- Peter Drucker, father of modern business management

I love the quote, and I love Peter Drucker, but I disagree with him. I think the quote should be “wherever you see a successful business, someone has made a bunch of courageous decisions.” My wife, for example, started a successful business 7 years ago. I am constantly impressed by the courageous decisions she has made, and continues to make, each of which was a tipping point in the survival and evolution of her business. Maybe I'll do an article and list the enlightening particulars of her decisions, but that will have to wait until I get her assent.

In any case, the Drucker quote brings us to The Sword of Damocles, an ancient parable that came down to us through a book written in 45 BC by the Roman senator and orator, Cicero.

## THE STORY OF DAMOCLES

Dionysius II was the ruthless ruler of the City of Syracuse in Sicily during the fourth and fifth centuries BC. He was rich and supremely powerful, but he was also supremely unhappy. He had a lot of enemies and lived in constant fear of being assassinated. He was so concerned that he slept in a bedroom surrounded by a moat and allowed only his daughters to shave him.

A court flatterer (now that's a job for you!) named Damocles showered Dionysius with compliments and remarked how blissful his life must be. Dionysius responded by asking “Since this life delights you, perhaps you would like to taste it for yourself?”

"Hell yeah" said Damocles.

The king seated Damocles on a golden chair, and had his army of servants wait on him. A feast meant for a king - literally. Servants presented him with perfumes and served him only the best wine, meats, and fruits, BUT, just as Damocles was beginning to really enjoy himself, he noticed that the king also had hung a sword above his head. The sword dangled there precariously suspended from the ceiling by a single hair from a horse's tail.

From that point on, fear for his life robbed the scent from the perfume, the flavor from the food, and the thrill from being waited on.

After a short while Damocles asked to be excused, allowing that "he no longer wished to be so fortunate."

## **DAMOCLES IN THE MODERN ERA**

So why do I bring up a crusty story from over 2,000 years ago? First, because the story comes to my mind almost every day. Not as it affects me personally (although it has and does), but rather in appreciation and empathy for small business owners. The Sword of Damocles expresses exactly the reason I love small business owners as much as I do. They bear a constant burden of responsibility, seldom appreciated, often alone, and often with few resources beyond courage and determination to help them bear the load. The difference between owners and Damocles is that business owners seldom have the option to bail out easily when they "no longer wish to be so fortunate."

Second, I am specifically bringing up this story now because of a conversation I had with a client a few weeks ago.

This client has sat beneath the sword for over thirty years in her role as a business owner - and she's done it without the wine, feast, servants, or the trappings of fantastic wealth at her disposal (although her business is currently growing like a weed). In our conversation, she casually let it slip that she felt uncomfortable attending large conventions and trade shows. When I asked her why, she said all the "big dogs" in attendance were intimidating. I told her about The Sword of Damocles and suggested she should be proud of her role as an owner. Few of the "big dogs" attending the conventions and trade shows were business owners who had ever sat where she sits or shouldered the responsibilities she faces every day. Why in the world should she be intimidated? I think the story helped her.

If you are not a business owner, maybe the story helps you better understand why the boss is stressed and distracted at times.

If you are now, or have ever been, seated beneath the sword, give yourself credit for your courage. It's like the Marine Corps slogan: The Few, The Proud, The Business Owner. Some of us are watching and respect you for it.

So yes, as Drucker says, wherever you see a successful business, someone has made a courageous decision and that decision was to take a seat under the sword and to stay there. Going forward, there is little to do about the sword itself, but you can certainly improve your situation by transforming the thread into a cable through better management decisions. Helping you do that is our purpose at [Anneal Business Coaching](#) and at the [The Cashflow Contractor](#) podcast.





## **Martin Holland**

Martin Holland is the son of a successful entrepreneur. He grew up hearing about margins and markets, R&D and sales, risk and return on investment. He learned to love the language and rigors of business and grew to believe that business is both the most human of all endeavors and the highest calling. After selling a company in 2011, Martin became a coach in order to help other owners build profitable businesses that do not require their day-to-day involvement.

A native of Norman, Martin earned a B.A. degree from Hastings College in Hastings, Nebraska and a Masters in Business Administration degree from the University of Oklahoma. Over the past 7 years he has written business plans that have raised over \$52.4 million in bank and investor financing. He has helped 157 (and counting) business owners reduce stress and increase performance through clarity of purpose, better marriages, more money, and more free time away from the business.