

How can you grow your practice with purpose?

By Ron Elsdon *(This article appeared as a chapter in the NCDA monograph, "Starting and Growing a Business in the New Economy" Edited by Sally Gelardin, National Career Development Association, 2007.)*

How do you check, on an ongoing basis, to see how your goals are coming along? Do you reward yourself when you reach a goal or overcome a roadblock? How do you keep yourself motivated during this process? Do you forgive yourself when you don't meet a timeline and continually rework your schedule so that it works for you? How do you stay ahead of the trends? What is your secret for creating training programs on topics of interest to career professionals? How do you solve time-related problems? Do you run several business endeavors simultaneously? If so, how do you keep each business enterprise organized and flowing? Perform an activity developed by Ron Elsdon on how you can grow your practice with purpose.

Getting Paid for Loving Work

One of my most satisfying early moments was writing that first check to a colleague working with us as a contractor. This is a bit surprising really, for isn't being an entrepreneur all about making your own money? Perhaps there is some conflict here. As members of a counseling profession, career counselors tend to almost the opposite extreme. We are reticent about our entrepreneurial aspirations, maybe fearing a slide down the slippery, material consumption slope. I recall being almost apologetic asking for payment. "I love this work; you're kidding me, we actually get paid for doing it?"

Purpose

Let's explore how to resolve this tension between business and purpose, and what resolution of this tension means for growing our practices. To be sure, we must be able to support ourselves if those practices are to come into being and prosper for our clients and customers. And we need to do this without losing our way.

Consider an example of someone who has grown an \$18 billion dollar operation. That person is Howard Schultz, the founder of Starbucks. He was interviewed by the Road Trip Nation crew and spoke thoughtfully and eloquently about heart and purpose in his life. Here are some words from his biography (quoted by Terry Pearce in *Leading Out Loud*):

“Years later, that image of my father – slumped on the family couch, his leg in a cast, unable to work or earn money, and ground down by the world – is still burned into my mind. Looking back now, I have a lot of respect for my dad. He never finished high school, but he was an honest man who worked hard The day he died, of lung cancer, in January 1988, was the saddest of my life. He had no savings, no pension. More importantly, he had never attained the fulfillment and dignity from work he found meaningful. As a kid, I never had any idea that I would one day head a company. But I knew in my heart that if I was ever in a position where I could make a difference, I wouldn’t leave people behind.”

Here is Starbucks first guiding principle: “Provide a great work environment and treat each other with respect and dignity.” Starbucks lives these values, for example, in its provision of healthcare coverage for employees. And the organization has far outperformed the major U.S. stock indices over the past few years. So there’s hope for us. It is possible to hold to principles that respect people and still build a successful business. I recall a colleague, who is active in the franchising area, once saying to me, “There are two types of people who start businesses – those who do it to make money and don’t care if it’s a hamburger stand or a real estate venture, and those who do it for a purpose. I want the first group.”

This article is for those in the second group, those who create a practice for a purpose other than just making money. In this second group, wonderful transformations can occur, just as they do in the career development process for clients. When people connect with their work on a deep level, the possibilities of personal transformation and fulfillment are actualized. When we build our practices with purpose, this also happens. Let’s look at what we mean by purpose and then explore ways to realize those exciting growth possibilities.

My wife and I have two practices: (a) Elsdon Organizational Renewal (EOR), focused on organizations as primary clients; and (b) New Beginnings Career and College Guidance (NBCCG), with individuals as clients. They are connected by a common theme, that of renewal and growth, whether as individuals or as organizations. The theme of emerging growth is evident in the names and logos of both practices. The mission statements for these practices are as follows

EOR: “We support organizations in enhancing performance, productivity and effectiveness through revitalized workforce relationships and leadership practice.”

NBCCG: “We provide caring and personalized help to individuals, students and families in career guidance, coaching and college planning services.”

Central to each is a focus on the relationship of individuals to organizations. This extends also to the broader community as expressed in these words from EOR’s approach and values: “With a scope that ranges from system and organizational interventions to work with individuals, our focus is on the heart of the relationship among the individual, the organization and the community.” At the heart of this approach is a belief that “organizational and community prosperity are built on enabling each person to fulfill his or her potential.” This infuses both practices and it is supported by our research (Elsdon, Ron, *Affiliation in the Workplace*, 2003) showing career development tangibly benefiting organizations as well as individuals. In our organizational work, we intentionally tailor our approach to each organization based on an understanding of their fundamental needs. We develop a broad range of capabilities, rather than using a laundry list of services off the shelf. Again from EOR’s approach and values: “We tailor our engagements to the needs of each organization with a process designed to surface critical issues, identify root causes, build effective solutions, monitor progress and implement.” This highlights content depth as another core value that we bring to each engagement.

Our purpose is not to be the largest in the field, nor to offer the same services for every organization in every geographic region, nor to enable one party to prosper at the expense of another. Our purpose is to enhance individual fulfillment and organizational and community prosperity by strengthening the relationship of individuals to organizations. This infuses all of our work. For example, we develop and describe the concept of affiliation as a foundation in the relationship between individuals and organizations built on a two-way partnership. It extends to incorporating the concept of inclusion, whether internal, external, community or global, into our descriptions of healthy organizations and in the variety of individual clients we serve. Purpose guides the choices we make about which business opportunities to pursue, and therefore it guides our growth. Let’s now explore this fascinating area of growth further.

Creating a Climate for Growth

In financial terms, the value of a business is determined by two primary attributes: growth and profitability. While they are not completely independent, we can examine them separately. For the purposes of this exploration, we focus mainly on one of the two aspects of value creation - growth. Growth occurs because strategies are sound and executed well. Let's look at some aspects of this. First, what kind of environment do we need to foster business growth? Let me suggest that there are several aspects:

- Being open to learning, to new ideas, to serendipity and responding rapidly to opportunities

Openness to learning and new ideas encourages experimentation, which is central to growing a practice. It is through such experimentation that new areas emerge, and it is the lack of such experimentation that often hampers the ability of large, entrenched organizations to grow. Here is one area where the rapid response and flexibility possible in a small practice trumps the ponderous approach typical of larger organizations with disconnected senior management.

- Being inclusive and welcoming different points of view

Growth often springs from the convergence of different points of view that result in the creation of something that was unanticipated. For example, the concept of building community around coffee shops in the U.S. as done by Starbucks, or the creation of a low cost, efficient airline as done by Southwest, has sprung from this convergence. We too can find new approaches to serving our client and customer needs.

- Creating a nurturing, trusting environment that values collaboration

Someone once said that new ideas are like new plants, you don't pull them up and look at their roots every few days to see how they are doing. Instead focus on building trust, well exemplified by Nordstroms' "Rule No. 1: Use your best judgment in all situations. There will be no additional rules."

- Letting customers guide and support development

The best growth ideas invariably come from customers. In many cases they may be willing to support development of a new project for their use that can then be taken elsewhere (e.g., a workshop or system intervention). Our work in exit

interviewing and demographic analysis sprang directly from a customer request. The challenge and opportunity is to listen well for customer needs.

- Choosing the right time to grow

Choosing the right time means recognizing that there is a right time for acceptance of a particular approach that may be driven by a changing external environment or emerging capabilities. Today we are able to readily deploy survey approaches using on-line resources, often in conjunction with in-person contact, in ways that would have been very difficult 10 years ago. Frequently, technical advances converge so that a number of people see the opportunity at the same time. Be in the vanguard of that movement.

- Avoiding applying old rules to new situations

I recall seeing an organization in the Human Resource arena try and force an organizational structure from its established (and declining) business into an emerging area with completely different needs. Not surprisingly the new effort quickly stalled. Different approaches, other than the traditional, would have been needed to address the emerging opportunity.

Building a Strategy for Growth

Having established a climate for growth, our next step is to build a strategy that can form the foundation for success. There are a number of aspects to this strategy. Following are some components:

- What are the core differentiating aspects of your practice?

For example, in our case, it is a strong focus on customizing the process to specific needs, being highly flexible in structuring customer and client relationships, responding rapidly, and focusing on delivering more value than is promised.

- What components should you include in the portfolio that constitutes your practice?

For example, does it include both work with individuals and organizations or just one or the other?

- What types of customer are you seeking?

For a small practice it is not necessary to convert the entire world to the use of your services, it is simply necessary to find enough customers who value your services. For example, we focus on organizational customers who are supportive of their employees and who value partnership. We don't choose to work with organizations focused on price rather than on value, evident through such approaches as on-line auctions. Also critical is deciding what fraction of your time and resources to commit to one customer. It may be necessary to commit disproportionately to one customer in the early stages. Long term sustainability requires diversifying your customer base. Set targets for this both in terms of the number of customers and sector breadth.

Skills You Need To Be Effective in Your Practice

One of the fascinating aspects of building a practice is the extent to which it draws on wide ranging skills. These include:

Content knowledge, such as proprietary expertise in analysis, approaches to building effective individual counseling relationships, and application and delivery of particular assessment approaches.

Consulting capability, or ways to effectively engage in conversations with clients and customers so that their needs are clearly expressed and understood, and you can build a bridge from these needs to the services you provide.

Effective selling, which is often a neglected area for those of us in the counseling community. This was a skill I needed to develop and the opportunity arose to learn much about consultative selling while with a large organization. Consider how you might do the same.

Financial and business acumen, which are important practical survival skills even though they may not be the most appealing area for many of us involved in the counseling, learning or human resource consulting areas. Fortunately today there are excellent computer programs, such as QuickBooks Simple Start, that make some of the hands-on aspects readily accessible. There are also tools such as the One Page Business Plan that can make areas such as business planning more straightforward.

Marketing capability, that delineates how and with whom you make contact. This is another key survival skill. One of the most challenging aspects of building a practice for many in the counseling field is effective marketing. Just as we would advise a client about effective approaches to reaching prospective

employers, so we need to decide how to reach prospective clients and customers. “Build it and they will come” does not usually work well. Resources such as the Small Business Administration (www.sba.gov) contain much valuable information and can help you make decisions about effective marketing, for example, whether it is through giving presentations, issuing a newsletter, advertising or web outreach. Once you have established a foundation and reputation, then much business will come through referrals.

Allocation of your time. A key question facing most small practices is how to allocate time between delivering and marketing/selling. The neglect of either one at the expense of the other will expose the practice to short or long term risks. The balance is likely to shift over time with the marketing and selling component larger in the early stages of business growth. Also, decisions such as what work do you perform rather than outsource are important, for example, in web development or maintaining financial records.

Managing costs and determining fee structure. One key aspect of business success is managing your costs and building your fee structure so that your margins meet your financial needs. Be sure to conduct solid market research so that you know appropriate pricing levels that are neither too high to exclude you from key business, nor too low to provide sufficient returns. An effective process for tracking costs is central to maintaining business viability and guiding your decisions about allocating resources. Again, computer based tools can make this process more straightforward.

Deciding on partners. You may find that engaging with partners can significantly expand your ability to provide services. These partners may connect with you on a contract basis to provide specific services, they may offer complementary services that are appealing to customers, or they may open doors to customers. The structure of each of these relationships will be different and it is important to think through options that may be open to you.

Giving how and to whom. One of the delights of building your own practice is the opportunity it affords for giving. This may be financial or it may be giving of your time, expertise or knowledge. I well remember hearing Susan Packard Orr (the daughter of David Packard, one of the founders of Hewlett-Packard), commenting on how Hewlett-Packard was giving to philanthropic causes when it was first founded in a garage in

Palo Alto. We have adopted a similar approach with our practice. Meager as the financial contributions are, they reflect our thankfulness for all that we have been given.

This might seem daunting, and I do wonder sometimes how it all comes together. But it does. These words from Kafka perhaps capture it best: “Just become still, quiet, and solitary, and the world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked. It has no choice; it will roll in ecstasy at your feet.” Here is where mentors can be so important. For me, mentors have included colleagues and friends who were kind enough to show me their expertise and give of their wisdom; customers who have been so supportive of a small practice; and family members whose constant support and presence make the journey possible and worthwhile. I wish you well on your exciting journey.

Activity: Creating your special statement of purpose

Purpose of Activity

A helpful exercise that can clarify the foundation on which to build your practice is to write a statement of purpose for your practice and then describe how your practice will be different and special for your clients and customers.

Learning Objective/s

Clearly state what you and your practice stand for.

Describe how your practice is different and brings special value to clients and customers.

Target Entrepreneur Population

While this is a particularly valuable exercise for those creating a new practice, it is also useful to re-visit on a regular basis both to renew your enthusiasm and to decide if your statement of purpose needs to change and evolve as your practice grows.

Participant(s)

You are the primary participant guiding this exercise, but it also affords an excellent opportunity to link with mentors and existing or prospective customers/clients for their perspective.

Setting

Since this is a reflective process, some may find a quiet, peaceful setting helpful in creating the initial draft of purpose, others may find the process catalyzed by conversation. In either case, view this as taking steps along a path that expresses the wonder of who you and those around you are, through your and their contributions.

Discussion

What kind of environment will you create to foster growth of your practice?

Are you open to learning, to new ideas, to serendipity and to responding rapidly to opportunities?

Are you inclusive and do you welcome different points of view?

Can you create a nurturing, trusting environment that values collaboration?

Will you let customers guide and support development?

Can you choose the right time to grow?

Can you avoid applying old rules to new situations?

How can you build a strategy that forms the foundation for success?

What are the core differentiating aspects of your practice?

What components should you include in the portfolio that constitutes your practice?

What types of customer are you seeking?

What skills do you need to be effective in your practice? (e.g., content knowledge, consulting capability, effective selling, financial and business acumen, marketing capability, time allocation, managing your costs and determining your fee structure, deciding on partners, giving how and to whom)

Assessment of Learning Outcomes

Did you clearly state what you and your practice stand for?

Did you describe how your practice is different and brings special value to clients and customers?

Is your statement of purpose integrated into your marketing materials, such as your web site and brochures, and are you able to bring it to life for others?

Resources

Print Resources

Brennan Anne and Janice Brewi. 2000. *Passion for Life*. New York: Continuum. An exploration of life purpose and meaning.

DePree Max. 1992. *Leadership Jazz*. New York: Dell Publishing. A moving account of servant leadership.

Elsdon, Ron. *Affiliation in the Workplace*. 2003. Westport: Praeger. An exploration of how the relationship of individuals and organizations can evolve for the benefit of both.

Horan, Jim. *The One Page Business Plan*. 2004. Berkeley: The One Page Business Plan Company. The fundamentals of building a business plan made accessible.

Palmer, Parker. *Let Your Life Speak*. 2000. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc. Connecting with meaning and purpose in our life and work.

"Let My People Go Surfing." *Outside Magazine*, October 2005, pages 70-78. How Patagonia's CEO Yvon Chouinard built a company while staying true to his values. (Thank you to Carlos Gutierrez of John F. Kennedy University for this article.)

Web Resources

Small Business Administration website: www.sba.gov. Many helpful resources for starting a small business.

Other Resources

"The Open Road." DVD documentary by Roadtrip Nation speaking to purpose in work. (Thank you to Anna Domek for the gift of this remarkable DVD.)