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Epilogue

“If I were granted do-overs, they would be...”

Consulting has been a great career ride for me personally. My very first taste of it was as a Northeastern University coop engineering student working for a firm called Nichols Dynamics located in Waltham, MA. The firm’s employment roster when I joined included the President, his Administrative Assistant, and me. I did everything from changing light bulbs, to deciphering unreadable government engineering drawings of jet engine test cells, to making presentations to prospective clients. What a personal growth experience that was! Over forty years later, I have only worked in the consulting industry during my career. While it has been overall very satisfying, there are some things that I wish I had done better. I definitely would have approached them differently if given another chance.



Setting Better Priorities in Managing Staff

As with automobiles, so too is it true with consultants – there are both high and low maintenance models. There is a strong tendency for managers to spend an inordinate amount of time with the “squeaky wheels” and not with the consistently reliable “stars”. Do this at your peril. In my experience, all staff need attention even if it is nothing more than to say that you appreciate their great work and positive influence on others. If you don’t actively manage and support your stars they will find someone who will. Take my word for it.

Exploring New and Better Solutions to the Same Old Problem

All businesses are cyclical, including consulting. There are times when project work is abundant and other times when it is anything but. And one of the challenges with consulting is that unlike manufacturing you can’t keep making product during the down times assuming that you can draw down the built-up inventory when the economy improves. Hours not billed to clients are hours lost.

When business turns south in consulting, the same two solutions are almost always proposed. The first is, let’s layoff staff to fit the amount of future, anticipated billable hours available and we’ll retain profitability. Well, this mostly doesn’t work the way a simple financial model would dictate. By no means are all the billable hours that are “freed” by the staff layoffs completely captured by the remaining staff. Principally due to existing client relationships and specialized skill sets, many, if not most, of the hours are simply lost to the ether. This tactic can lead to a “death spiral” when

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the first round of layoffs doesn't accomplish the goal of completely redistributing the available hours among the remaining staff. Management's follow-up reaction is often, well we just didn't layoff enough people in the first round. You can see where this might be heading.

The second solution is to ask the current and would be "rainmakers" to sell more work by upping their game (e.g., more face-to-face contacts with existing clients, making blind calls to as yet unidentified prospects, identifying "outside the box" opportunities, etc.). This can have a positive result but in most cases the sellers are already doing everything they can to meet their sales targets and maximize their bonuses. Complicating the challenge is that this new sales initiative often comes at the same time that management has put a hold on marketing expenses in order to better control costs. Kind of a Catch 22, if you will.

I don't pretend to have a better, magical solution to the problem of a downturn in client work. I have been through any number of these periods in my career and they all have been agonizing, regardless of the role you are expected to play. I have been fortunate in never having been "counseled out" during one of these periods, but I have had to tell people whom I really respected and liked that they no longer had a job. Not a fun experience.

If I had to do it over again, I would suggest that any company should have a *formal* contingency plan, including "what if" scenarios, for business downturns; a plan that fits their particular company makeup and marketplace. Companies almost always have formal growth strategies and plans but, to be honest, I don't think many spend the same amount of time thinking about managing during turbulent times.

Recognizing the Impacts of Incessant Travel or Time Away

As stated earlier in this book, I have travelled extensively during my career. Overall, this has been a good thing, filling my life with many personal growth opportunities and experiences. But it has had an impact on both my family and my job performance.

One should be careful about how travel can affect families. They say that "absence makes the heart grow fonder" but for the most part I haven't found that to be the case. When your 4-year old son comes up to you after you've been gone for three solid weeks and begins punching you in the legs and says "I hate you" that can have quite an impact on you for a very long time. At that age they just don't understand why you have been missing from their lives for the past few weeks, which seems like an eternity to them. You can use the rationale that you were doing it for them, but it simply doesn't register with youngsters. I also discovered that when you are gone a lot families will develop their own sub-nuclear core and when you return home, you can feel like an electron orbiting outside that core. It takes a while to become the proton or neutron in the nucleus that you once were. Really cool gifts from a foreign land will help!

Traveling can affect your working environment as well. You can very easily become unplugged from what's going on back at the office. Interpersonal relationships change and evolve, new and exciting projects can be won by your colleagues, people can come and go, staff that you manage won't receive the attention that they need and want, and so forth. Everyone learns to survive, and even thrive, without you. This can also be true for secondments which is "the detachment of a

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person from his or her regular organization for temporary assignment elsewhere.” (Merriam Webster) Although I have never personally been “seconded” I have managed and known staff who have been. Safe to say, that being away is being away. Unless you’re careful you can lose touch with your own organization and they can lose touch with you. Out of sight, out of mind.

The bottom line is that while you’re travelling or on secondment, try your best to stay in touch as best you can. It will serve you well. These days it is not as difficult as it once was. Try to make those regular staff meetings, even if you have to call in. Make an effort to attend social functions. Respond to email messages promptly. You should never be considered unavailable.

Not Worrying So Darn Much

Some years ago I was working closely with a client and I said to her somewhat sadly that I was convinced that I had inherited a gene that caused me to worry too much and I wanted to learn how to better handle my constant anxiety. She quickly cautioned me to not change too much. It was my worrying about making sure I met or exceeded her expectations that made her comfortable that she had chosen wisely. That was quite an eye-opening response for me.

I am and always will be a worrier. And not just about work; about everything. As with many traits, it is both a blessing and a curse. Living life with “what if” scenarios always in the back of your mind can make you better prepared for life’s little hiccups. On the other hand, worrying about things that are never going to happen makes for an unnecessarily stressful life. I recognize from my life observations that there are as many people on the other end of the “worry scale” as there are on my end. Thus, it’s probably true that most of us could stand to adjust our “worry quotient” in one direction or the other. I’m working on it.