

## CHAPTER 1

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# **SO YOU WANT TO BE A SPORT AND PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY CONSULTANT? LAYING THE FOUNDATION OF YOUR CONSULTING BUSINESS**

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## INTRODUCTION

So you want to have a sport and performance psychology consulting business, huh? Who wouldn't want to? Your clientele includes the best of the best in a wide variety of performance domains including sports, business, the performing arts, medicine, law, the military, and others. You earn a very good income. You travel the world. You get to live the dream!

But hold on just a minute. We don't want to take the wind out of your sails in pursuing this enviable dream. At the same time, it's important that you separate fantasy from reality and know exactly what you are getting into. Yes, establishing a sport and performance psychology consulting business can be a wonderful career path. But, as the saying goes, "If it were easy, everyone would be doing it."

As you explore this possibility, you may be a graduate student considering career options after you have earned that master's or doctoral degree that you have worked so hard for. Or, you are an experienced mental health professional interested in making a career shift to work with a healthier population. Or, perhaps you are a professor who wants to either consult on the side of your faculty position or maybe even take the leap from the secure environs of academia into

the exciting and seemingly lucrative world of consulting. Regardless, as you move toward making a decision on whether consulting is the right fit for you, it's essential that the decision be an informed one that gives you a realistic appraisal of what is required of you at every level of your professional and personal life:

- Education
- Credentials
- Experience
- Skill sets
- Personal attributes
- Financial resources
- Competitive marketplace

*Practice Development* is devoted to providing you with an extensive “education” on what it takes to establish and maintain a successful consulting business in sport and performance psychology. This chapter will lay the foundation from which you can make an initial determination of whether you have the basic capabilities, competencies, attributes, and skill sets that we have judged to be necessary for success with a consulting business.

## WHY PEOPLE WANT TO BE A SPORT AND PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY CONSULTANT

As we noted above, on the surface, the life of a sport and performance psychology consultant seems quite enviable. As a result, many types of people are attracted to this career path. Many people drawn to the field are former or current athletes who appreciate the power of the mind in sports performance and may have used sport psychology to advance their athletic efforts. We are also contacted often by mental health professionals who have grown tired of working with clients with psychological or emotional deficits and yearn to embrace a positive psychology approach to helping generally healthy individuals to achieve their goals. It is also quite common for people from the corporate world to want to share their knowledge and experience with leadership, team culture, and other business-related areas with individuals and companies to help them accomplish their objectives.

Here are some of the popular reasons why people want to create a sport and performance psychology consulting business:

- **Your own boss.** You are responsible to no one but yourself. You are in charge of every aspect of your professional life. You are in control of the why, how, who, when, and where you work. You also have the flexibility

to structure your work life as you see fit, as long as you accommodate the needs of your clients.

- **Work/life balance.** As your own boss and with the ability to control your own schedule, you are in a better position to maintain a healthy work/life balance. You can make deliberate choices about the time you devote to work and to your personal, family, and social lives. You can also better establish boundaries between your work and non-work life, so your work doesn't interfere with your life away from work.
- **Challenge and excitement.** There is rarely a dull moment when you are running your own consulting business. Your business and the market in which you work are in a constant state of flux, meaning you are always being challenged to come up with new content and means of delivery, identify trends, find new clients, and, generally, keep your business fresh and vital. This ongoing challenge creates an environment of excitement and possibility in which you have opportunities to work with interesting and motivated people, for travel, to help clients resolve problems and achieve their goals, and to constantly evolve as a professional and a person.
- **Make a difference.** One of the most rewarding things about being a sport and performance psychology consultant is your ability to make a difference in people's lives. Helping clients clear obstacles in their paths and accomplish their deeply held goals is fulfilling. As we can both attest, this impact goes far beyond success in clients' performance domain. Rather, you have the ability to improve their lives as people, outside of that of being a performer. You can help them develop new and healthier ways of thinking, experiencing emotions, and interacting with others.
- **Respect and prestige.** The role of a consultant can earn you considerable respect and even prestige. Your ability to help people will be seen by others as worthy of admiration. Additionally, if you are able to work with elite athletes, Olympic or professional teams, successful businesses, noted performing arts organizations, and other leaders in their performance domain, there is a certain amount of cachet that you may garner. We should note though that very few professionals in our field attain the lofty status that is associated with such prestige, so it is definitely not a reason to enter the field.
- **Opportunity for growth.** If you choose to start a consulting business in sport and performance psychology, you will open yourself to tremendous opportunities for growth personally, professionally, and financially. The

constant challenges will keep you stimulated and push you to get outside of your comfort zone in so many aspects of your life. But opportunities are not guarantees. How much you grow in these areas will depend on your capabilities, hard work, patience, and the quality of service you provide to your clients.

## MYTHS ABOUT CONSULTING

As we just discussed, a part of the allure of a consulting business in sport and performance psychology is the many wonderful benefits it offers. At the same time, what this career path may offer isn't always what it will offer. There are, in fact, many perceptions that lead people into our field, but then leave them disappointed when those perceptions turn out to be more myth and misconception than reality. Here are some of the most common ones we have found.

### **Consultants Don't Have to Work Very Hard**

When you run a consulting business, you are, as we noted above, your own boss, which means that you have complete flexibility to come and go as you please. With this freedom, though, comes the responsibility of having to do everything to make your business successful and the realization that you only make money when you are working. As we can both attest, having a sport and performance psychology consulting business requires you to devote prodigious hours to making it a success, far more time than is typically required for a "real" job. Well beyond the client work, which is the reason you got into the field, you must also commit considerable time to marketing, client management, returning phone calls and emails, scheduling, billing, and paying the bills, to name just a few of the many items that you will find in your inbox as a consulting business owner.

Though you are your own boss, you must cater to your clients' schedules, which will limit your freedom. The chances are that, early in your career, your primary market will be young athletes with parents with aspirations for their children and the financial resources to pay you to help them achieve their athletic goals. Working with young people means accommodating a schedule that includes school until the middle of the afternoon followed by sports practice until dinner time. This means you will have to schedule most of your clients in the late afternoon, early evening, and on weekends, all times that are outside of the workday of those with salaried jobs and all times that will likely interfere with your

personal and family life. Our point is that not only will you work far harder than if you had a regular job, but you will have far less freedom than you think you will.

### **Consultants Make a Lot of Money**

There have been a few sport and performance psychology consultants who have been well rewarded financially as they built and maintained successful consulting businesses (e.g., Dr. Jim Loehr). At the same time, there is no evidence that a consulting business pays lucratively for a large swath of our field. Your income will depend on many factors, including some that you can control, for example, the quality of your work and your ability to market yourself effectively, and others that are outside of your control, such as the economy and the competitiveness of the marketplace in which work. A high income is possible, but it isn't a good reason to get into the field.

The challenge of running a consulting business is that you only make money when you are working with clients rather than collecting a steady salary. There is certainly the opportunity to build a large client base and command significant consulting and speaking fees, but that clientele and those fees are rarely there from the start and they are not a certainty at any point in a career. If you are fortunate enough to become established in a niche that has a sizeable client base with substantial financial resources, you have a chance to earn a relatively good income (though nothing close to what careers such as finance, law, or medicine can offer).

Early in your career, you should expect to make very little money because you will have to set lower fees that are commensurate with your level of expertise and experience, and your client load will probably be quite small. As you gain experience and your consulting business establishes a good reputation and following, you can raise your fees (the marketplace will tell you how high; see Chapter 4 about setting fees). The niche you work in, your ability to offer high-quality services, and how well you market yourself will determine the income you are ultimately able to earn.

### **It's Easy to Build a Consulting Business**

This myth may be the biggest one of all. Data indicate that 50% of all small businesses fail within the first five years (SBA, 2013). Though we have no firm data to draw on, we would speculate that this number is far higher for consulting businesses in sport and performance psychology, given the large number of young professionals emerging from graduate programs in our field and the paucity of

work opportunities available to them. This means that the odds are against you even before you launch your consulting business. As we will discuss shortly, aside from the obvious hard work and long hours that are required to develop, maintain, and expand a consulting business, there are many other attributes and requirements that are necessary. The key question to ask yourself is, “Do you have what it takes to buck the odds?” (There is no shame in saying “no” and choosing another career path.)

### **Clients Will Line Up at Your Door**

Here is a harsh reality that no one in our field likes to admit: athletes, business-people, performing artists, and high-achievers in other performance domains have done just fine without sport and performance psychology for a long time. As much as we wish otherwise, our services just aren’t seen as necessary for success, nor are they necessary for many people.

At the same time, there is ample evidence that what our field teaches can be of great value to performers and can make the difference between success and failure. The problem is that only a small portion of the population of performers realize this. And a much smaller number of potential clients have ever heard of sport and performance psychology, much less availed themselves of its benefits. The end result is that, despite our best hopes, clients aren’t lining up at the door clamoring to pay us for our services.

If you wait for clients to come to your door, you will have a very long wait. In fact, cultivating clients (see Chapter 8) is the essential thing you must do to have a successful consulting business. Your effectiveness at educating the public about the value of our field, identifying your target market, marketing your services, and providing high-quality services are the foundation for a sustainable consulting business in sport and performance psychology.

## **CURRENT REALITY IN SPORT AND PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY**

As you continue to explore whether a consulting business in sport and performance psychology is right for you, there are several current realities that you must understand. Though probably somewhat discouraging, they are not intended as such, but rather meant to ensure that you enter the field with your eyes wide open and your perspective grounded in what is instead of what you wish it would be.

## **Graduating Students**

There are currently more students each year being educated in the field of sport and performance psychology than there are professionals as a whole earning a living in the field. There are, at present, 104 universities in nine countries offering graduate degrees in applied sport psychology (Sachs, Burke, & Schweighardt, 2011) and a handful that have a performance psychology component to their curricula. There are, as of 2013, almost 2000 members of the Association of Applied Sport Psychology, of which about 1200 are professionals and 800 are students (K. Lindeman, personal communication, 2013). Though there is no clear data at this point, we think it's safe to say that a good portion of those 800 students would like to have a consulting business in sport and performance psychology. This means that there is a crowded field for those who want to do consulting work in sport and performance psychology.

## **Number of Organizations Hiring**

The vast majority of employment opportunities in our field lie in academia, which focuses primarily on teaching and research. There are a small, though growing, number of positions available that involve applied sport and performance psychology work. The United States Olympic Committee has four full-time sport psychologists on staff who work with the teams and athletes they serve. The USOC also has a registry that National Governing Bodies can avail themselves of to work within their development and elite-athlete systems. However, these NGB opportunities typically occur on a voluntary basis or for a small stipend.

IMG Academy, a company that operates training programs for a number of sports, has five full-time mental conditioning coaches on staff. It also offers internships to graduate students and recent graduates in sport psychology (A. Mugford, personal communication, October 6, 2103).

The fastest growing employer of sport and performance psychology graduates is the U.S. military. The Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness program, with centers around the country, provides training to build resilience and enhance performance of its soldiers, family members, and involved civilians.

Research indicates that about 60% of 120 Division 1-A university athletic departments have full-time sport psychology service providers. Additionally, these organizations often hire part-time consultants to work with teams as the need arises (Hayden, Kornspan, Bruback, Parent, & Rodgers, 2013).

There is no research to date that indicates how many people in the field of sport and performance psychology are operating consulting businesses. An Internet search reveals numerous sport psychology consulting businesses distributed

around the U.S., though it is impossible to judge how successful and sustaining they are. Our own informal data collection, through our extensive network of colleagues in the field, suggests that the number is small.

## QUALITIES OF A SUCCESSFUL CONSULTANT

To build a consulting business, you need to have a solid foundation of a quality graduate education in sport and performance psychology, extensive practicum experience, and supportive mentors. But this background is a necessary, but not sufficient, requisite to consulting success. Creating and maintaining a successful consulting business requires a certain kind of person who is both highly skilled as a consultant and also entrepreneurial in their nature (see Chapter 4). We have compiled a list of the qualities that we have found to be important to having a consulting business (there is also an assessment you can complete in the Exercises section of this chapter that will further help you determine whether you have the attributes to be a consultant).

### **Passionate**

There are many adjectives that you could use to describe this attribute: motivated, driven, self-starter, go-getter, independent, maniacal, goal directed, persistent, and disciplined. Regardless of the label you attach to it, the bottom line is that you have to love the process of building and running a consulting business and be highly self-motivated to do everything that is required (and there is a lot that must be done!). As your own boss, there is no one there to tell you what to do or how, when, or where to do it. Plus, you don't get paid when you're not seeing clients, yet there is so much that goes into running a consulting business beyond client services. Not only do you have to be passionate about the exciting parts of having a consulting business, but you must also be committed to the more mundane aspects of the business side of consulting.

### **Confident**

Unlike many career paths, consulting in our field doesn't provide a clear direction, structure, or process for you to follow. Plus, there is much that impacts your business over which you have little control. There will be wonderful successes on which you will be riding high and great failures that cause great disappointment. As a sole proprietor of a consulting business, you are, as we have noted above, your own boss, which means that you are on your own in most if not all



operations of the business. You don't have someone at your side, whether a boss or a colleague, who will give you a pat on the back or words of encouragement when things aren't going well.

Because of all of these challenges, confidence is another absolute prerequisite for building and maintaining a sport and performance consulting business. You just have to really believe in yourself and your ability to achieve your professional goals. This confidence must be deeply held, broad, and durable for several reasons. First, your confidence in yourself will be communicated to your prospective and current clients. This faith in your ability is the foundation for developing a productive relationship with clients and for challenging them to grow. Second, there are so many parts of a consulting business that must be done and done well beyond the client work, from marketing to administration to finance to networking to social media. Third, your belief in your ability to succeed in a consulting business will be tested daily. Fourth, your confidence will be what keeps you going when business is slow, the non-client work is unexciting, and you experience setbacks. In sum, your mettle will be tested constantly when running a consulting business, and it will be your confidence that will enable you to pass the test.

### **Innovative**

Though your practice's unique value proposition may remain the same as your consulting business gets off the ground and becomes established, the services, programs, and products you offer and the markets and clienteles you serve must remain active and capable of regular transformation and growth. Because markets and client needs and goals change constantly, the ability to evolve and adapt is essential to your practice's long-term viability and success. As a result, innovation in the market is a necessity for your consulting business to remain vital and relevant in a crowded and competitive marketplace.

Consider the story of Blockbuster, at its peak in 2004 the dominant home movie and video game rental company in the world. Blockbuster failed to recognize the impact that the Internet would have on movie and television viewing habits at home or see that web-based distribution of media would replace brick-and-mortar stores. Once it became clear that the web was more cost-effective and profitable, Blockbuster lacked the vision and innovation to quickly and successfully transform its business model. The result was that online companies, such as Netflix, took control of this new market and Blockbuster filed for bankruptcy protection in 2010. You don't want to fall victim as Blockbuster did.

While much of the sport and performance psychology knowledge base hasn't changed dramatically in recent decades, the landscape of sport and performance

psychology consulting, and the ways in which you can conduct the business of consulting, is changing constantly, driven by, for example, new developments in the application of this knowledge, the neurosciences, technology, and the expansion of markets. If you aren't continuing to grow and evolve, you are likely to be left behind in what you have to offer the marketplace (Simons & Andersen, 1995).

Staying fresh and vital can occur in several ways. You can regularly expose yourself to others in sport and performance psychology and other related fields through reading and attending conferences. You can also seek out new competencies and certifications that will add "tools to your toolbox." Collaboration on research, writing, and consulting projects is an excellent way to experience other perspectives and gain new knowledge and skills. You can also develop a network of colleagues who can provide peer and mentor supervision that will challenge your *modus operandi* and catalyze the evolution of how you consult and how you do business (Anderson, Miles, Robinson, & Mahoney, 2004).

Though there is no crystal ball that allows us to foresee the future, being alert to trends in the marketplace, seeing the relevance of new ideas outside of sport and performance psychology, and exploring the application of new technology as soon as it emerges can mean the difference between staying ahead of the curve and being left behind for good. For example, recent technological advancements in consulting include the use of mobile apps, the availability of real-time data, blogging, and Skype-based consulting.

## **Resilient**

Ambiguity, uncertainty, insecurity, unfamiliarity, unpredictability, and uncontrollability are your constant companions when you run a consulting business in sport and performance psychology. This unsettling state comes from having too many things to do in too little time, not knowing where your next clients will come from, not having a steady paycheck, and the vicissitudes of the economy.

For many people, this much instability is a cause of stress and discomfort that is intolerable and would prevent them from pursuing this career path. Yet, if you commit to establishing a consulting business in sport and performance psychology, being resilient and dealing constructively with this unsettling landscape is critical to your success (Twitchell & Biswell, 2002). Resilience means you're accepting this inherent instability, being able to recover quickly from setbacks, and, importantly, staying motivated, confident, calm, and focused despite its ever-presence.

**Realistic**

You've worked hard to earn your graduate degree and feel like the world is your oyster. You feel confident in your abilities and feel ready to start at the top, with Olympic athletes, a professional team, or a big corporation. If this is the attitude you hold, stop right there because if you continue down this path of "I know it all" and "I'm ready for anything," your consulting business may be in trouble even before it gets off the ground. Remember, as the biblical saying goes, "Pride goeth before a fall."

Of course, you need to believe in your capabilities, but your perception of your capabilities must be aligned with the reality of your capabilities. Also, as was noted in the introduction, knowing how to do sport and performance psychology consulting is very different from doing the business of sport and performance psychology consulting. The attributes and skill sets that are necessary to be a successful consultant are not sufficient to build and maintain a successful consulting business. We have more than 40 years of experience both consulting and running consulting businesses and when we reflect back on our early careers we see how little we knew about consulting itself and, even more so, the business side of sport and performance consulting. The dangers in the early stages of establishing a consulting business are having unrealistic expectations (Poczwadowski & Sherman, 2011), believing that you can help anyone and even go so far as to consider yourself a "guru" (Friesen & Orlick, 2010), taking credit for client successes (Tod, 2007), and not knowing your limits (Simons & Andersen, 1995).

Ultimately, what will enable you to sustain a consulting business are not your capabilities as a consultant—though those are certainly necessary. You must also become as knowledgeable as you can about the non-client aspects of the business (things you probably didn't learn in graduate school), surround yourself with experts who can support the areas of the business that are beyond your knowledge and skill sets, and patiently allow your business to grow as you nurture all aspects of it. Confidence in your capabilities coupled with a healthy dollop of reality is the best recipe for long-term success in a sport and performance psychology consulting business.

**Honest**

Early in your career, you will likely feel tremendous pressure to attract clients and generate business simply to ensure your professional and financial survival. The problem is that you still lack the experience, accomplishments, and associated status and credibility that will readily draw clients to you. As a result, you may feel