

The Business of Greatness

Introduction

Regular *Journal* contributor **Rose Mercier** has tapped into her own successful business experiences to produce an invaluable guide by which women coaches can (and should) conduct their professional lives in order to get the maximum benefit from their chosen career. So often driven by passion for the sport they coach, women coaches, more often than not, forget all about caring for themselves. They ignore the importance of operating within a well-thought-out framework consisting of a career plan, solid business practices, and a well-defined vision based on carefully articulated values. A strength of this article is the many questions Rose poses, questions that are essential to defining a career path that should lead to excellence in every facet of life.

This article is relevant to all women coaches, not just the “professional” or paid coach. We know beyond doubt that the capacity to coach well is not strictly the purview of the professional. In Canada, many of our successful women coaches operate as volunteers. Often the salary is the only distinguishing feature between professional and volunteer — they share commitment, skill, education, and a consuming desire to have their athletes achieve their potential and derive the maximum from sport. Therefore, as Rose stresses, building your coaching career on effective business practices should be common to all. As she frankly acknowledges, such practices are all too easily put on the back burner; there are so many more pressing details to manage, even for someone as scrupulous as she.

With this article, Rose has laid out a simple, logical, straightforward pathway to coaching success, one that the *Journal* believes has the potential to benefit women coaches at all levels of Canada’s sport system. Good luck, and let us know how you fare! — Sheila Robertson

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The Business of Greatness

by Rose Mercier

This article is very different from any that I have previously written for the *Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching*. It draws on my own experience as a self-employed consultant to identify business practices that can be used by women coaches, whether they are self-employed, salaried, or volunteer.

I have been a self-employed consultant for nearly 15 years. My business has been successful by many standards, more so than I might ever have imagined in the tentative first days of 1995. I had only the sketchiest business plan when I started and, fortunately, an initial contract. I had a lot of work experience, a fairly extensive network in the field in which I intended to work, and a strong desire to carve my own path. And as I often say: The good news is that I have always been busy, and the bad news is that I have always been busy. No doubt, that may sound a lot like your career. And while I continue to enjoy the confidence of clients and celebrate their successes and progress, and there always seem to be new and interesting opportunities, I have from time to time been nagged by a feeling that I should take the time to plan where I am going next. Lately, the desire to set a revitalized direction has intensified. In the past couple of months, I have acted on that feeling and embarked on planning for the next phase of my business. In so doing, I am discovering both those practices that have helped build my business and those that I need in the future. I believe that the lessons of this journey are as relevant to any woman coach who wants to succeed as they are to me.

In his book [Good to Great](#),¹ Jim Collins introduces the Hedgehog Concept, which explains how good to great companies, in contrast to other companies, base their strategic decisions on the following three dimensions:

1. a deep passion about what they do
2. a deep understanding of what they can do better than any other company
3. the knowledge of what generates sustainable cash flow and profitability

This way of describing what distinguishes great companies from good companies has helped me in analyzing my business. Although it is possible to operate in the same way throughout a career or the life of a business, chances are that many of you, like me, are not satisfied in the long run with maintaining the status quo. In my experience, if you are self-employed, you subscribe to a set of fairly demanding standards of your own making. I have always been intrigued by the possibility of excellence, so I have developed my own way of looking at the three dimensions of strategic success.

It's not a direct application because, obviously, I am not a large corporation. However, I believe that it is essential to look for lessons in other fields. What I learned from the Hedgehog Concept² is that great companies focus on the activities that ignite their passion, know what they can be the best at in the world, and know how to effectively generate sustained, robust cash flow and profitability. This might seem a big stretch in thinking for a one-person business, whether self-employed or in the employ of someone else. However, here are the business practices that I have created from this idea:

Practice 1: Decide what work you are passionate about and follow that passion. If you deeply enjoy introducing children to basic movement skills, continue coaching in this context. If you are only excited about coaching when you are working with athletes who are resolutely committed to personal excellence, then search for those types of coaching opportunities. I know what gives me energy in consulting, and there are many things — supporting volunteer leaders to make significant changes within an organization they deeply love, working with coaches who want to be more effective leaders, helping organizations to create clear directions for a desired future. However, the common factor is the passion I have for working with others to help realize new possibilities. Do you

1. Jim Collins, [Good to Great](#) (Harper Collins, 2001), 95–119.

2. "Hedgehogs, on the other hand, simplify the complex world into a single organizing idea, a basic principle or concept that unifies and guides everything." (Collins, 91)

know what you are truly passionate about? What gives you energy? What do you procrastinate about doing? Avoiding or putting off certain things provides a good hint about where not to focus your coaching business.

Practice 2: Discover what you can be best at. You might want to be the “best in the world” in a particular aspect of coaching, or you may want to discover how you can stand out from whatever crowd you are in — all the coaches of your sport, in your community, province, region, country, or the world — or how to become a recognized authority in a particular area. You don’t need to be “the best” right now, but take a hard look at where you can become outstanding. For example, is there a particular coaching expertise that is missing in your sport where you have the capacity to excel? Equally important, what can you **not** do better or **not** stand out in the crowd by doing? My quest for business renewal has offered up several insights about new areas where my business can be unique and where I believe that I can be truly outstanding; these areas also require a significant commitment to professional development in new knowledge. It is not enough merely to identify the areas where you can perform well as a coach; you need to do the work. A critical business practice for me — and you — is the continuing development of existing and new competencies.

Practice 3: Understand how your career or business generates sustainable income. What is the formula that will enable you to continue coaching? Where are the possible areas of income? If you are coaching in a sport where it is possible to earn your living, determine the different ways that generate income: salary, lessons, workshops, resources, equipment, and so on. What is the most important source of a sustainable income, and what factors influence the level of income? If you are a volunteer coach or receive a seasonal honorarium, you still need to understand how you can sustain your ability to coach. It is essential that there is equity between the time and experience you invest and what you receive in return. Our first inclination is to measure equity in financial terms: Are you paid what your experience and competence are worth?³ Pay is certainly an important indicator, but it is not the only one. If you are a volunteer coach, how do you ensure that there is an equitable return for your time? Do your athletes and their families show respect for the commitment you are making to them? Does the club board, school administration, municipality, or township ensure that there is a safe coaching environment with necessary facilities and equipment? Is there recognition of your efforts? Are you able to coach in a way that challenges you? If there are imbalances in these areas, or if you only partly apply your ability, or if you repeat the same coaching experience over and over, you will eventually feel a sense of inequity.

The above are starting points in thinking about your coaching career, but if you do not go from thinking about how to operate your business to organizing your ideas into a written plan, then it is unlikely that you will become the coach you want to be. Coaches know how essential it is for an athlete to have specific goals and a written plan for achieving them, and yet it is not common practice for coaches to do the same for themselves. Imagine how curious it is for an organization development consultant who helps organizations to craft strategic plans and who emphasizes the obvious — if it isn’t written down, it seldom gets accomplished — not to have a written plan.

It is not always easy to do what we know is necessary. This is another key idea from Jim Collins’s *Good to Great* that I hold as an essential business practice: You need to exercise

3. In previous editions of the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching, issues of coaching contracts, salary, and benefits have been addressed; these are valuable references if this is an aspect of your coaching business that needs attention

the discipline to work out a strategy in a rigorous fashion. That means taking the time to work through all of the stages of a sound planning process and write them down. And then it requires exercising the discipline to pursue the strategy. Imagine taking the time to prepare a sophisticated annual plan, with its interrelated micro-cycles, and then improvising every practice. That's not good coaching practice, and simply thinking about what you might do isn't good business practice. No, it isn't easy. It is, however, what distinguishes exceptional business practice from the ordinary.

Planning

I'd like to share the elements of the planning process I use with organizations as well as the one I have been using to re-focus my business. You don't need to take a week off to complete this plan; I have been working on this in short sessions over the past six weeks and will probably take another six weeks to complete it. I have already started, however, to experience a different level of focus in work.

The starting point is clearly identifying values that guide your coaching business. What do you believe are the fundamental principles that should characterize how you coach? There are several different ways to clarify values. A simple way to start is to write down a list of 10 values. Review these and then select the five most important. You can, if you wish, try to choose two or three from the list of five. There is no right answer about the number of values you should have; you have as many as you have. I usually suggest that somewhere between three and seven should do it; even the largest corporations in the world have only a handful of core values. Besides naming the value, it is important to explain what the value really means. For example, one of the core values of my business is respect. I explain this value as follows: "I believe that organizations are first and foremost people working together where everyone deserves to be heard and valued. I believe that personalities are the spice of organizational life. I believe that differences among people — their experiences, points of view, values — are a rich source of knowledge."

This explanation is a clear and constant reminder of how I want to work. It reminds me that I need to choose ways of working that are consistent. It also signals to clients what they should expect. Values become your lines in the sand: They tell you where compromise is not a choice. They also give you energy. When you finish this part of your plan and you show it to close friends, they should recognize you in your statement of values. Values are the most enduring part of your business plan.

Once your values are clear, you can start to work on your vision. A vision expresses your long-term aspiration for the future of your coaching business. It should answer the question of why you are coaching. I like visions that are short-term, qualitative statements that are motivating and resonate with you whenever you read them. There are lots of ways to create a vision (others might call it a purpose or mission), and you can find a way that works for you. Some recent American Express commercials offer great examples of personal visions that absolutely capture the work that individuals do:

- "Live life on the edge." (Surfer)
- "Tell unforgettable stories." (Martin Scorsese)
- "Use laughter to help children learn." (Jim Henson)
- "Help people learn to dance to their own tune." (Ellen DeGeneres)

Once you have a clear vision, you can develop a strategy that helps you plan how to accomplish the major changes that are necessary to move toward your vision. The plan I have been working on has three strategic goals and about eight objectives. They express

very specific changes I intend to make over the next five years. Your plan doesn't need to be complicated or long; in fact, I like to think that you can capture a plan for someone who is self-employed on a single page. If your plan doesn't make you gulp a bit, it may not result in sufficient change. Operating from a plan is the business practice that will make the most difference to realizing what you want to achieve as a coach.

There are other business practices that have helped me maintain my business over the past 15 years. The principle behind each practice remains the same, even if it takes on a different form depending on whether you are self-employed, salaried, or a volunteer. Here are the practices that inform my business.

1. Manage the business of your coaching.

- a) Make the nature of each working agreement explicit. Preferably, write it down. This is essential for new relationships. What results are you responsible for delivering? What resources will the other party supply? When does the relationship start and finish? When will payments be made? What expenses are covered? These are essential components to any agreement if you are self-employed, but even if you are a volunteer it is still valuable to be clear about the scope of your responsibilities, your expectations, the expectations of the group you are coaching, and the conditions under which you will be working.
- b) Establish a regular time to complete ongoing business transactions. Issue invoices, complete expense claims, complete your bookkeeping, or turn over your receipts over to an accountant at the same time of week or month. Stay up to date with GST payments, quarterly tax payments, and insurance.
- c) Get professional advice when important issues arise. If you aren't sure whether to incorporate, what type of insurance you should have, or what expenses are tax deductible, look for advice. Check with colleagues for references and look within your circle of friends for expertise.

2. Look after yourself.

- a) Protect your health and energy. This is one of the things women seem to let go of easily. I know from experience. It is easier to put the needs of your athletes or your clients ahead of your exercise class or a healthy lunch. However, we are not very effective in our roles of supporting and leading others if we compromise our energy. We lose focus, sometimes so incrementally that we don't realize it until we reach a state of burnout. Taking a part of each day for yourself is essential business practice, even if some days it is only for a short period of time.
- b) Pay attention to friends and family.
- c) Develop your resilience for change. Understand that change is happening all the time and that we resist both negative and positive change. Look for the opportunities and be curious about possibilities. Adopt an attitude of the glass being half-full.

3. Expand yourself.

- a) Allocate time and funding for your own professional development, maintaining your professional network, learning new skills, and reading current material.
- b) Use mentors to help you develop professionally. Mentors are a powerful way to learn to operate effectively in a role. Mentors can also enhance your effectiveness in a specific area.
- c) Develop networks. Too often we think of networking as collecting business cards from people we think might be able to help us in future. I have a friend who is brilliant at developing networks, and I have learned an essential truth about

networking from her: In networking, you should focus on creating connections and opportunities for others. Doing this inevitably brings new contacts back to you.

4. Choose how you present yourself and your business.

- a) Branding is a concept that has a lot of currency these days. It's useful to think about your brand character — how you distinguish yourself from other coaches. What are the objectives that capture what is unique about you? You can use this concept to help you create a logo, business cards, and a website. You can also use it to help choose what you wear to a club meeting or a coaching conference. Something I grow increasingly conscious of is that everything I do, say, write, or wear tells people something about who I am. You can, of course, be obsessive about this; however, a measured approach toward being conscious about how you represent yourself is sound business practice.

Having a business, being self-employed, or fulfilling a role as a volunteer coach can be both rewarding and challenging. At an early point in my business, I worried about how to have a balanced life. However, as my business has evolved to become an integral part of my life, I have recognized that my ideal is a blended life, where business, family, friends, and community co-exist in a comfortable fashion. Having clear values, a motivating vision, and a crisp strategy helps keep the various parts of life working in harmony. Sound business practices support the achievement of personal, business, and coaching goals and reduce the anxiety that is caused by feeling out of control or always behind schedule. I hope that by sharing some of what has helped me achieve success, I will have offered you some ideas for managing the business side of your coaching life.

About the Author



A Kingston-based consultant in leadership development and organizational transition, **Rose Mercier** has a long involvement in sport. She competed in swimming and athletics, graduated from the University of Alberta with a degree in physical education, and coached club swimming in Ottawa before starting a 20-year career in sport administration.

Rose worked as the director of education with Swimming Canada from 1976 to 1984. There, she was responsible for developing a variety of innovative coaching education programs. She was the director general of the Canadian Cycling Association from 1984 to 1990, a policy analyst with the International Relations and Major Games Directorate within Fitness and Amateur Sport from 1990 to 1992, and director of the Tait McKenzie Institute from 1992 to 1994 for the Canadian Sport and Fitness Administration Centre.

Self-employed since 1995, Rose's consulting work focuses on facilitating organizational transition, strategic planning, and leadership development in sport, other non-profit organizations, and the public sector. She works with a wide variety of clients; however, her real passion lies in her continuing relationship with sport organizations, including the Coaching Association of Canada, the Canadian Curling Association, Football Canada, Athletics Canada, Swimming Canada, Cowichan 2008 NAIG, Speed Skating Canada, Aboriginal Sport Circle, Cross Country Alberta, Ringette Canada, Sport Canada, and various federal/provincial/territorial working committees.