

Lean Time Pursuits: Becoming a Better Consultant (and Person) on Your Off Days

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How can consultants use the time between consulting engagements more productively? Those who learn to view the professional and personal elements of life holistically can find many opportunities to strengthen relationships, sharpen skills, and achieve balance, allowing time for everything that is important to us: family, work, community, and spiritual needs.

Whether you are a consultant practicing on your own or heading up a small firm, you will probably experience lean times in between engagements when the phone does not ring and no new work is coming your way. It is up to you whether this will be a stressful time or a productive time. The way you view life as a whole can make a difference in how you handle these lean times. The more holistic your view of life, the better consultant and person you will become. Who we are and what we bring to others is shaped by all that we do, not just by our paid, professional endeavors. You can enrich your business acumen by strengthening your relationships and sharpening your skills.

Consider that consultants do not have “professional” lives and “personal” lives but *whole* lives. Work is not the good part of our lives and non-work the bad part. The two domains work together to make up our whole lives. Once we understand this concept, we can use our lean times productively, enhance our flexibility, and create synergy that strengthens all our endeavors. When we stop compartmentalizing our lives into work and non-work domains, we achieve balance that allows us to enjoy the intensity of each moment and tend to everything that is important to us: our families, work, communities, and spiritual needs.

We plan our work, but we neglect to plan our lives. Right now, while the phone is not ringing, is the perfect time to map out a strategy for achieving the balance that will help us become not only better consultants, but better parents, spouses, friends and community members. Here are some ideas to help you start framing your strategic thinking.

1. *Begin with deep self-assessment*

Ask yourself what you want to accomplish both personally and professionally. How do you want to allocate your time among your roles as consultant, parent, spouse, friend, and community member? What are your priorities?

2. *Think about how you can reach your life goals through your work*

Ask yourself what consulting work you want to do. Write down what your ideal consulting work would look like in five years. Once you have identified the work you want to do, ask yourself what work you are ready and able to do. Do some market research and talk with other consultants to find out what work is available. Identify what you need to learn in order to do the ideal work you have identified. Start reading and studying.

3. *Adopt an abundance mentality*

View slow times as a gift. Spend quality time with loved ones and friends. Catch up on chores around the house that you have not had time to do. These activities can help lessen the stress and anxiety that accompany lean times. While a certain amount of stress keeps your adrenaline flowing and provides a sense of urgency, try to manage your stress in a way that creates energy instead of anxiety and paralysis.

4. *Learn to savor each moment and do things when your energy and motivation levels are high*

This might include doing market research early on Saturday morning, writing an article for a consulting journal, reading a novel or going for a walk. Rigidly allocating time for activities such as exercise or spending time with your parents may help you manage your busy schedule, but it can also detract from the quality and enjoyment of your experiences.

5. *Focus on your strengths*

Focusing on your strengths may provide you with your greatest growth opportunities. We sometimes put our strengths on auto pilot, because we think we are doing so well. As a result, our attention may have become dulled in these areas. You may become so dependent on your model that you stop hearing your clients' concerns. Acknowledge your skills and then learn more about them. The energy and motivation flowing from your strengths can help you identify options that you may not have considered and help you keep your skills on track.

6. *Think of ways you can make yourself visible through paid and non-paid pursuits*

Use these activities to sharpen your skills, develop new capabilities, and market them to potential new clients. You might:

- Speak at civic organization functions;
- Lead a workshop within your local community;

- Publish articles about your experiences and aspirations;
 - Present papers at national conferences;
 - Meet with other consultants to gain new perspectives;
 - Offer to train others in subject areas that interest you;
 - Take a class or research new areas of prospective new consulting assignments.
7. *Consider new marketing tools that you have not tried before*
Think about different ways potential clients can experience you. These might include networking, developing products like training materials, teaching, print interviews, print and electronic newsletters, trade association leadership, radio interviews, television appearances or developing your own Web site with chat rooms.
8. *Spend time developing your emotional intelligence*
This is a core competency that all professionals need to continually upgrade. Learning to handle your emotions while talking and listening carefully to people will enhance your relationships with your clients, colleagues, family, and friends.
9. *Consider how you will maintain balance between your personal and professional goals when things begin to turn around and the phone starts ringing*
As your thoughts are consumed by business strategy, your competitive position, cost and quality, client loyalty and market dynamics, do not forget that the other aspects of your life deserve equal attention. Decide now how you will maintain your relationships and tend to the needs of your family, friends, and community. Make sure that you are not used up in the pursuit of your ambitions. Find ways to reenergize so that you can do the work you love and participate in the life you want for yourself and others.

Lean times do not have to be about stress and high anxiety. They can be a time to strengthen relationships, enhance skills, discover new interests, and make contacts that will generate work you want to do. All the different roles and aspects of your life can work together to shape your personal direction if you allow them to. The work you do during lean times can enhance all areas of your life. When you look in the mirror you may see not just a better consultant whose phone is ringing with new opportunities, but a fulfilled parent, spouse, friend, and community member.

About the Author

Cynthia C. Hargis has 24 years of experience as a higher education administrator. She has spent the past 17 years working with education program administrators in the areas of communication, organizational change, mentoring relationships, teambuilding, conflict resolution and negotiation, stress management, and wellness through balanced living.

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