

Dear Coach

What are your career aspirations? How are you going to reach those goals? This column will guide you to a new career stage. //



Dear Coach,

At the beginning of each year, I create a visual of my annual goals and revisit longer-term goals. Seven years ago, I wrote a list of things I wanted to accomplish by the time I was 50—a milestone I celebrated last October. Among these was “to have a highly successful consulting practice, doing work I value with people and organizations I respect.”

T+D WANTS YOUR STORY!

T+D is looking for workplace learning and performance professionals to contribute to this column. Are you anticipating a move into e-learning? Are you a recent graduate who wants to become a designer, presenter, or trainer? Are you a corporate trainer transitioning into a career as a consultant or entrepreneur?

We want to hear about your aspirations and help you with the challenges you face in your pursuit of those goals. Send your career path story to mailbox@astd.org.

This January, after 25 years of organization effectiveness leadership roles in private and large not-for-profit national organizations, I acted on this goal and launched my practice. My top areas of expertise are designing and launching business-aligned diversity and inclusion strategies, diversity training, and group facilitation. I also offer “Chief Diversity Officer in a Box” services to help smaller companies establish strategic diversity initiatives. But I’ve learned quickly that the start-up process is slow, and leveraging my 25 years of experience to get off to a strong start represents a new challenge.

I started college at 16, commuting daily from Yellow Springs, Ohio, to nearby Central State University, a historically black university at Wilberforce. Back then, I assumed I’d graduate at 20 and

find a job in healthcare like my mother—my role model. By 18, I began looking for a change of scene, so I moved to Washington, D.C., where my father lived, and found a job at a clinical lab, where I also met my husband. I got my own apartment, which ate my paycheck, so school was put on hold for a while.

After some time, the older workers around me began to encourage me to finish school. One encouraged me to explore a career in HR and hired me as a compensation assistant (thank you, Rose). So I eventually finished my undergraduate degree at 30, after marrying and having my first son. I was a personnel manager, with seven years’ experience, and a career.

I really got into my work, and I enjoyed the variety of future leadership roles as I gained expertise in various areas of HR and organization effectiveness, finally finding the area that continues to be my greatest passion—diversity and inclusion. I grew up in the town that was home of Antioch University, the school Coretta Scott King attended. She and others made a great impact on the community and the inclusiveness I experienced there in the 60s and 70s, which in turn served as my model for the diversity I wanted in my workplaces.

Over the years, I enjoyed working both at the systems level, and at the individual and group levels. But as my responsibilities grew more challenging, they also became less personally rewarding. Between emails and meetings,

I sometimes felt more like a bureaucrat than a champion for change. The adventure left, and along with it, my work-life balance. Within my own hierarchy of needs, I still had to self-actualize.

I decided at 46 to return to school and get my masters in organization development. It was the best thing I had done in years. I continued to work in internal roles following graduation but the desire to consult became stronger and stronger until I finally decided the time was right as I set my goals for 2008. I decided to trust the saying, "Leap and a net will appear."

In recent months, I've spent long hours marketing my new business. I mapped a chart of my network universe, and emailed a summary of my new services to many colleagues and friends to announce my consulting practice. I pursued speaking opportunities at local and national conferences, set up a website, and still met about three times a week with other consultants and contacts to discuss needs and leads.

As a result of this work, I got my first consulting assignment in February, and several others have followed. My immediate goal is to build my independent consulting practice and exceed my corporate compensation level. Once established, I want to expand to a global organization effectiveness practice with a small team of consultants.

My question then, is how can I best leverage my 25 years of leadership experience to jump start my business? Additionally, how do you suggest I gain quick credibility as a consultant?

I am excited about this new adventure, and I know the ride will often be bumpy. But for the first time in many years, dear Maslow, I am feeling self-actualized.

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Dear Lisa

Welcome to the wonderful world of consulting as a single shingle. The ride you're embarking on is very much like a roller coaster ride: fast swings up or down, periods of nothing, and a rush of exhilaration when it is all going in the right direction!

Jump starting

With your first assignment under your belt plus others in the pipeline, you have already jump-started your business. Now, is your battery fully charged or was this just enough to get you to the next rest stop?

One of the greatest problems with being a sole proprietor is that when you're doing the work, you do not necessarily have time to do marketing. It is imperative to always be working on getting the next assignment in the door. If you're not marketing, networking, and putting out proposals, you are not filling your pipeline. Leverage your 25 years of experience by continuously networking with everyone you have ever worked with or known professionally. Work your leads, and follow up when you meet someone new.

Get your 30-second introduction down cold. Continue getting your name out there in the community through speaking, volunteering professionally, and actively seeking referrals.

Now is the time to do some reconnaissance work. Find out not only who your competitors are but what they have on their websites. Does yours look just like theirs, or do you have a unique selling proposition? What does your collateral material look like compared to those you go head-to-head with? What markets are they pursuing? Are there competitors with whom you can have a synergistic relationship? I have found that partnering with other consultants has not only been an enriching experience personally, it has been stimulating, sparked creativity, and ultimately helped me to provide better products and services to clients.

For a wealth of additional ideas, I recommend perusing the books *Marketing Your Consulting Services: A Business of Consulting Resource* or *The Consultant's Quick Start Guide: An Action Plan for Your First Year in Business*, both by Elaine Biech. Another source of inspiration is Chellie Campbell's *The Wealthy Spirit*. A copy of Peter Block's *Flawless Consulting* is a must have.

The credibility question

If 25 years in the business has not built your professional reputation to the place you want it, testimonials from your customers are crucial. I have a colleague who includes a paragraph in all of his proposals asking clients to recommend him to at least three other firms if they are satisfied with his work. He stays busy.

If you follow through on your commitments, are forthright with your clients, and demonstrate your ethical behavior through actions and deeds, you are there. The only thing you have is your name and reputation. Stand tall, "act as if," and know yourself. Listening to your intuition will keep you from affiliating with consultants whose ethical behavior may not be comparable to your own.

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T+D is published by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)

010859.63250

