



STARTING A PRIVATE

PRACTICE ?

START WITH A BUSINESS PLAN

An interview with Constance Lynn Hummel, RCC, about the all-important and often-overlooked business plan

BY CAROLYN CAMILLERI

CONSTANCE LYNN HUMMEL, RCC, HAS HER OWN PRIVATE PRACTICE where she manages a roster of clients for psychotherapy, clinical consultation, and leadership coaching. She's also an experienced business strategist, who has bundled her wealth of entrepreneurial know-how with her coaching skills to offer online "Business Bootcamps" especially suited to people launching private practices.

An RCC starting a private practice may have (and should have) many questions — any of which could fill pages. However, there is one aspect of private practice Hummel says often



gets overlooked — the business plan. She likens not having a business plan to trying to build a house without blueprints.

“You can miss some key pieces you don’t realize you’ve missed until you trip over them,” she says.

Sometimes people interpret issues they run into as an indication that they aren’t cut out for private practice, when the core problem is that they didn’t have a business plan.

“People forget that business has a skill set,” says Hummel. “People do MBAs so they can be good at business, but therapists often feel they should be able to figure it out on their own.”

While it is possible to do it all on your own, getting some basic business skills and support can make all the difference. But the first step, always, is a business plan.

THE EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

Creating a business plan requires careful consideration and brutal honesty about who you are as a therapist and person, who you enjoy working with, and how you enjoy working. And it may be hard to be really honest.

“As therapists, we are often taught to put ourselves in other people’s shoes. ‘What would my clients want? What would my clients like? How would they want this to work?’ And while this is part of the equation, if you build a practice that’s only in the service of your clients and functionally doesn’t work for your life, it’s a recipe for burnout.”

Instead, ask yourself these questions: What do I like talking about? What lights me up? What could I spend most of my day discussing with people and not be tired at the end of the day?

The early stage of a business plan is an imagination exercise, where you dig deep to find that big dream, that perfect vision.

“I really encourage people to spend a lot of time in that visualization part because that’s also where our mindset stuff is going to come in,” she adds.

Those thoughts and beliefs we have about ourselves that work against us: *Who am I to have this perfect life? Who am I to even want this? I could never do this.* If thoughts like this come up, you’ll want to find out where they are coming from.

“If we don’t believe we are capable or deserving of our big dream, then we’re going to find some way to step on it,” she says. “Lots of this is internal work to get to the point where we can say, ‘Yes, I believe it’s possible. I believe I deserve this. I think I am enough.’”

Hummel cautions against mimicking someone else’s practice.

“Even if you can functionally

replicate another practice, you may end up being miserable because it’s not really a reflection of who you are and how you want to work,” she says. “Every single business plan for every single therapist is going to be somewhat unique because every therapist is unique, and how you work and who you work with are going to be different.”

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THE FRAMEWORK

The next question to ask yourself: How do I like to work?

“People say, ‘You have to have evening appointments. You can’t have a private practice without evening appointments,’” says Hummel. “But there is no ‘have to’ for anything with private practice. I know somebody who offers 3:00 a.m. appointments because they’re a night owl and they work with shift workers. If your brain turns off at five o’clock, don’t offer 7:00 p.m. appointments. You don’t have to.”

However, if the clients you build your practice around need you on Saturdays, that’s a fundamental business plan issue.

“You either need to rethink the clients you want to work with or rethink working on Saturdays.”

Another part of the “how do I like to work” question is in-person vs. online therapy. Many counsellors like online work and so do their clients. But it isn’t

always the case. You need to be clear on what you want and whether it works for the clients you want to work with. Which leads to the next question: who do you want to work with and what works for them?

“You can specialize in a population, then be a generalist for them. You can specialize in a specific technique, then be a generalist for whoever wants to work in that way. You can specialize in a specific problem and whoever wants to work with it. You can even have a super niche, where you work with a specific population in a specific way solving a specific problem.”

While there are many ways you can present yourself, for others to be really clear about what you do, you have to be really clear.

Hummel says sometimes people question whether it’s really possible to have the practice they want and still make enough money to live.

“The answer is always ‘yes,’” says Hummel. “But it’s going to have to look a certain way in order for that to happen. You may have to shift who you work with. You may have to shift when you work or how you work. It’s a matter of adapting the business plan to meet the goals. But the answer is always ‘yes.’”

IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN

Implementing your business plan means determining whether you have the functional business skills.

“It’s important to stay in your zone of genius,” says Hummel. “You don’t have to be an expert at everything.”

The world is full of people who love doing what you might dread — technology, accounting, admin. To do all that yourself, you need a level of confidence in each area or to find people to assist, whether as a contract arrangement, mentoring, or training.

“What therapists can forget is that they also have to do therapy. And if they’re doing therapy most of the time, who’s running the business?”

Building a good business plan and getting clear on the answers to all the questions may mean checking our belief systems. It may also mean realizing you need to be in a better financial position first or to wait until your children are finished school or to take some courses.

“You can still be building the plan through all that, then hit the ground running when the timing is right,” she says.

CHANGING THE PLAN

Hummel emphasizes a key point: it’s okay to change your business plan — in fact, flexibility is necessary.

“An issue for many people is they feel like whatever decision they make they are married to for the rest of their career,” she says.

They get stuck worrying about making a wrong decision or that they might not want to do the same thing in five or 10 years.

Hummel’s response: “Do what makes sense for you for the next year or two. You still want to have a general vision of where you’re headed in the next five to 10 years, and you want to make sure whatever you’re doing now keeps that vision a possibility. But remember that whatever you are building today, by the time you build it, you are going to be a different person and you may want slightly different things.”

Hummel reviews her business plan every year.

“That doesn’t mean I rebuild my whole practice every year,” she says. “I

might make a slight tweak, a little mild pivot, where I just change one thing.”

Usually every four years — although that’s not a hard rule — Hummel functionally rebuilds her practice.

“Because I am different. What I want to do is different. Who I want to work with is different. How I want to work is different. And in order to do that, I have to go back to make changes to my plan.”

For example, maybe working on Saturdays was great when you didn’t have kids, but now you have kids. That means revisiting your business plan to adjust how you work and possibly who you work with.

It’s important to ask yourself periodically if the plan is still working

for you.

“None of this has to be your forever plan,” she says. “This is just the map you’re using right now to get where you need to go in the immediate future.”

In fact, the first year of private practice is a giant experiment.

“If you have no data, you can’t really make real decisions. The questions are: ‘I think I want to do this. I think I like working in this way.’ And then you do it and you figure out, ‘Did I like it?’ If yes, continue to do it. If no, do something different.”

And no matter how long you have been in practice, it’s never too late to reassess an existing business plan. Creating a unique plan for your practice and building in flexibility put you in the driver’s seat and ensure you are running your practice, instead of your practice running you. ■

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