



Developing The Dream: Play in Private Practice

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CLINICAL

EDITOR'S COMMENTS:

The author emphasizes how mission, team building, and flexibility can help turn private practice dreams into reality.

Imagine: You have just walked out of a meeting feeling shocked, and deeply disappointed. The company where you practice play therapy decided to convert the playroom into a new office. The toys and tools you use to provide developmentally appropriate services for children under 10 will move into your adult-oriented office. Management has cited funding issues and increased adult client referrals as reasons, but in the back of your mind, you begin to understand a deeper issue. The core missions for you and the company you work for are different. Their policies and procedures, habits, and marketing focus on different populations: adults, couples, and adolescents. In your heart, you long to focus on children and provide them and their families with developmentally appropriate care. You recognize this divergence of missions for the first time, and a dream is born.

Starting a Private Practice

In my first professional job at a government agency, I provided counseling for children and families. After that, I worked at a residential facility for children. This was heaven: surrounded by great people, doing important work, and never short on clients. However, my personal and professional needs evolved, and I required more flexibility with my hours and client load. So, I started a private practice. The years that followed taught me a lot about the focus needed to run a practice with children as the primary clients, working as a solo practitioner and a contractor, and handling general business concerns. In the introduction, I described myself a few years into private practice when I was a contractor with a wonderful group. My co-workers funneled their energy towards adults and whole families. Providing care to children under 10 and consulting with them on their needs made for a great environment. However, our practices, licenses, education, and clientele were very different, with needs that did not always overlap. Dreaming of a practice where decisions about facilities, procedures, and marketing focused on young children and families began to take more and more of my time.

Now, I operate a growing therapy practice with other clinicians. Working with families and children continues to be extremely gratifying and allows me to work fairly flexible hours. My therapeutic skills are used alongside other growing skills in business, marketing, and finance. It has been endlessly rewarding, exciting at times and scary at other times. Three steps will help you realize your dream to own, manage, and maintain your own private practice: develop your mission, find your team, and remain flexible to adapt to unforeseen challenges.

Step 1: Develop Your Mission

Ask yourself, "What drives me to have to have my own company?" I dreamt of providing high-quality, child-and-family-focused counseling. The hard work and the risk an owner assumes in developing a company are uniquely theirs. The company's mission distinguishes it from others in the industry that work with the same population. Use the mission statement to create a brand that informs clients and referral sources about how you work with children and families in therapy. Developing the mission includes spending time visualizing the kind of work you want to do and the type of business you desire to create.

When I began visualizing my business, I knew I wanted to work in close conjunction with other therapists. My dream included having a strong peer group with whom to discuss client care, provide treatment team planning, and to refer to for specialties I didn't have. The clients would feel a seamlessness that would incorporate the relationship with the therapist in every aspect of the treatment process. Incorporating one's world view and how that would work out in day-to-day treatment became a subject of my journaling and discussions with other professionals. I saw our offices deeply embedded within our community and a place of refuge that felt comfortable and safe. I read books to help me unlock my creativity (e.g., Coelho & Clarke, 1993) and to learn about leadership (e.g., Friedman, 2007). In developing your vision, think about ways to make your mission a concrete part of all you do.

Once you have a vision, focus on this dream and learn to share it through your mission statement. Write a mission statement that defines the client

population you serve, where you serve them (e.g., in office or in home; face to face or online), and how you serve them (i.e., what services you provide). The mission statement becomes a rubric that determines the scope and boundaries of the business and the practice. When deciding if a service is appropriate to include in your practice, ask yourself a few questions to check your personal and professional goal alignment:

1. "Does it fit my population?"
2. "Does it stay within our location, or will it have to be outsourced?"
3. "Who will provide this?"

It is important to investigate and meet the needs of the community, but also to look introspectively into yourself and consider what you feel called to do. This statement serves as the vision of all you will do for the next few years.

Step 2: Build A Team

Implement your mission with the assistance of more experienced professionals. Seek continuing education to maintain your play therapy knowledge and skills, but also seek relationships and implementable advice about building and growing your business. There are professionals who provide free or inexpensive advice on HIPAA compliance, marketing, and networking, for example. Using their free services can help you decide where to spend more on the paid services you need. Do NOT skimp on really important things, such as your website, your insurance, and your legal structure.

Contract with legal and financial professionals. With their assistance, decide how you would like to legally structure your business. Skipping this step causes great difficulty legally and ethically. Many clinicians decide between a limited liability company (LLC) and a professional LLC (PLLC), but you should work with a knowledgeable attorney to pick the right structure for you. Beware, copying other people's contracts will give you a general template, but it will not reflect your unique business or your specific needs. Hire an attorney familiar with how and why to set up a business entity. This team member will help you think through and navigate the legal ramifications of your business choices and objectives. Laying a good foundation at the beginning will save you a lot of time and future headaches.

As therapists, we easily suggest mentoring to our clients, but do we seek it out when we need it? When I decided to own my own business and not simply operate as a clinician with an office, I signed contracts with a lawyer and a marketer. I read books to learn about management through policies and procedures (e.g., Gerber, 2001). I attended workshops on private practice ethics and developed relationships with ethical private practice owners. My team quickly identified goals: incorporate the business, create a marketing plan, and write a procedure manual. These extra resources were added business expenses, well worth it in the long run to keep my dream from becoming a nightmare.

Step 3: Remain Flexible to Adapt to Unforeseen Changes

Your business will continue to develop. You will learn amazing new things, meet new people, and see new opportunities. Amid all this change and growth, reevaluate your business often. Like all dreams, yours may wander

into new areas. Use your mission statement to determine where you are in implementing your vision. Be ready to respond quickly to new information and new opportunities. If it fits with your mission, do it! But always come back to your central calling and mission statement to ground your business on the solid foundation you have created.

Legal and professional challenges occur all the time in private practice. Many of the therapist owners I know keep up with a few quality podcasts and services (e.g., Huggins, 2010; Mills, 2017). These podcasts provide real time information and support to those who need real world ideas from people who know the world of therapy, HIPAA compliance and messy family dynamics, as well as the world of lawsuits, digital records, etc. Having access to these wonderful professionals can assist you in finding just the right phone service or Electronic Health Record (EHR) Service.

Considerations for Mitigating Risks

The reality of managing your own business necessitates breaking a lot of preconceptions.

- First, the clients will not find your practice without marketing or insurance panels telling them where it is located and what you do. Using social media, networking, and local print media are all ways to secure a professional reputation and establish your expertise to begin developing referral relationships.
- Second, consider which kind of investment you can afford to make: upfront or back-end. Upfront investment entails a quality team of people thinking through the business and begins prior to providing services. Back-end investment entails responding to something going wrong—a complaint, a bad experience for a client, or a program that fails to thrive. For example, although another clinician may allow you to copy his or her business documents, those documents may have been written for a different kind of therapy practice. A couple's therapy practice may have different issues than one unique to working with children, and confusing custody situations may go unaddressed. In some areas of practice, this may be mildly annoying to clients, but in other areas, you may open yourself and your business to violations and complaints at the state-board level. This will cost time and money only after a problem is identified.
- Third, private practice ownership is lonely at times. You have a great team, your vision brought in wonderful co-counselors, but in the end, all decisions come back to the owner. Create time for peer relationships and support. Find other play therapists or family-focused clinicians to discuss all parts of your business. When challenges arise, your support system can help determine how you react to those challenges.
- Fourth, review the laws and regulations governing your business regularly. There are state-specific ethics for a reason — these guidelines govern licenses in each state. Federal law does not match state requirements exactly. Reviewing policies and procedures should be a regular business practice, and it is prudent to follow the most restrictive laws.

- Fifth, just because a business structure is well-planned and everything looks great on paper does not mean it will all work out, or that what worked last year will have the same effect next year. However, as professional play therapists, we understand that times of challenge birth times of great opportunity and creativity.

Once you have developed your mission, built your team, and mitigated potential risks, imagine what walking into your own thriving practice would be like:

You drive up to the office and see your sign over the door. Upon entering your practice, you water the plants in the foyer. Walking down the hall, you notice that the play therapists who worked last night swept the waiting room and picked up the toys. As you brew the coffee, you see that the traditional playroom is ready for the day and you quickly tidy the adolescent playroom so it is ready as well. You unlock your door, turn on your computer, and begin to return messages for the day. You review your schedule. You will be talking to a master's-level class about owning and operating a play therapy practice in the morning, conducting a supervision session at midday, and providing several play therapy sessions to round out your afternoon. Your vision and dream have become a reality! Play on!

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