



LESSONS LEARNED

**PRACTICAL TIPS TO BUILDING AND
MAINTAINING YOUR FITNESS CAREER**

By Kathleen Trotter, FIS, PTS

I RECENTLY CHECKED MY CANFITPRO MEMBERSHIP CARD AND REALIZED THAT I HAVE OFFICIALLY SPENT OVER HALF MY LIFE IN THE FITNESS FIELD

— a totally surreal milestone considering I spent the first half dreaming of being a lawyer, sneaking unhealthy food, and lying to get out of gym class. I was, to put it mildly, overweight and unhealthy. What a difference half a lifetime can make. I am now a trainer with a Master's in Exercise Science, a Holistic Nutritionist, a Life Coach, and a fitness enthusiast.

Believe me, my evolution was not instantaneous. Building my career took perseverance, a growth mindset, patience, realistic expectations, and practice. The initial “domino” was my Mom forcing me to join the YMCA. Participating in aerobics led to teaching, which led to becoming a personal trainer.

As a newbie, I dreamed of owning a studio and being a health writer. Excellent goals, but thankfully, at some base level, I understood that careers develop over time. I was in grade one of my fitness career and it would be self-sabotage to expect to “ace grade 12” before I had mastered grades one through 11. I would have quit if I had expected to achieve my goals overnight, or even in two or three years.

“ONE BECOMES A BETTER, MORE KNOWLEDGEABLE HEALTH PRACTITIONER ONE COURSE, ONE DAY, ONE CLIENT AT A TIME ...”

Mastering anything takes “bum in the seat time.” Sure, when I started I was certified and competent, but I wasn't excellent. I progressed toward my goals and gained confidence and skill through practice. This probably sounds obvious, but it is amazing how easy it is to have unrealistic expectations and get caught up unproductively comparing our experiences to a colleague at a completely different “grade” in their career.

Your goals will, obviously, be different than mine. There are many career paths — all have pros and cons. Train in a gym? They

take a monetary cut but provide the facility and possible clients. Train clients at home? Keep the money, but travel eats at your profits.

One becomes a better, more knowledgeable health practitioner one course, one day, one client at a time, and there is a price of admission for every path — a trade-off to every decision. Take the path with the pros that work for you and the cons that you can handle.

A few other lessons learned along the way:

A) Interacting with the Client

You might be the fitness expert, but every client is the expert on “them”.

Be curious. Listen.

We are not an expert on anyone's life except our own. Never presume to understand your client's life, or goals, better than they do. You might want a six-pack. Your client might dream of improved mobility. Help them achieve their version of fit, not yours.

Create individualized programs.

Build a plan to fit your client's weak links, exercise history, goals, and lifestyle realities verses trying to fit a person into a pre-existing plan.

B) Personal Growth

Set boundaries.

You can't be of any service to anyone, including yourself, if you're dead, burned out, exhausted, etc. Set boundaries. Be available and open to opportunities, but never sacrifice your health. Yes, easier said than done. I used to sleep at the gym to maximize working hours. I had to learn better (although my partner, James, would half-jokingly say, since I now have a studio in my home, I just brought the gym to where I sleep.) All jokes aside, take baby steps. Initially, I took Sundays off. Currently, I take Wednesdays, Sundays, and start late Tuesdays and Thursdays. As your career evolves, so should your boundaries.

Pinpoint what gives you joy.

No client wants to work with a bored, unengaged, “going through the motions” trainer. Feeling unmotivated? Do something that brings you joy. Take a course, travel, or have some fun — “light yourself up.”

Cultivate a growth mindset.

A “growth-mindset” is the ability to non-judgmentally learn from every

experience, to lean in to knowing that when you don't know something or have not mastered something, you just don't know it or haven't mastered it yet. For example, don't have a full client roster? Analyze the situation, pinpoint opportunities and maybe take a PR course, then implement your plan.

Conveniently, a growth-oriented mindset will help your personal development and aid client retention. Clients are more likely to stay engaged in their health process, and thus reach their goals, when they can navigate the inherent undulations. If your client can't do something (i.e., push-ups, eliminate late-night eating), no problem. Help them analyze the situation. Then create a plan of attack.

Teach yourself and your clients to use “not knowing” and/or “failing” as opportunities to learn and become stronger. For more information, check out Carol Dweck's work.

C) Networking, staying current, and scope of practice

As my osteopath, John D'Aguianno, says, “be the hub” — create a referral network. This “hub” serves multiple purposes: it allows you to respect scope of practice and support your clients, and once you develop relationships, referrals will flow in both directions.

Cultivate like-minded colleagues. Attend courses. Read about and/or try different workouts, classes, practitioners, etc, so your advice stems from knowledge. Be the client. Working with two outstanding trainers early in my career, Travis Anderson and Kristen Bustamante, allowed me to experience the type of trainer I wanted to be.

To paraphrase Maya Angelou, people don't remember what you say; they remember how you make them feel. Strive to make each client feel seen, heard, inspired, and motivated.



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