



The Mommy Contract

One of the reasons why I've grown to like jogging is that I seem to have the most interesting epiphanies while doing so. Ideas and solutions pop into my head out of nowhere often on issues that I hadn't thought about in days. I guess they were just lurking in my subconscious, and my brain needed a real rest and some clear air to provide me crisp new ideas. A few weeks ago I had just such an epiphany. As a small business owner, I partner with many other individuals, businesses, and groups and typically there's a contract associated with any business transaction – certainly any involving money. Obviously contracts are in place to ensure that everyone understands the terms and conditions of the transaction and to ensure that boundaries are clearly outlined and understood by all. About a mile into my jog it suddenly hit me like a bolt of lightning that I needed to draw up a new contract...this time with myself!

Like many others, I'm a busy mom juggling many different roles simultaneously – wife, mother, entrepreneur, friend, sister, keynote speaker, consultant, corporate trainer, etc. and trying to fit all those tasks and responsibilities into a 24 hour day (with sleep) would be laughable if it weren't so frustrating on a day to day basis. While I jogged, I literally felt a gust of wind slap me in the face (the universe wringing my neck I'm sure) as if to say – *“STOP and make a contract with yourself! Decide what you will do and what you won't do and let everything else go.”* It reminded me of a piece of profound advice I'd received several years earlier. I was riding in the car with my wedding consultant on my way to look at a possible wedding venue and she turned to me and said, *“Dana, I learned a long time ago that the key to living a peaceful, happy life comes with two simple steps. First, decide what's important. Then, live a life that reflects that. The second is much harder than the first.”* That sage advice continued to nag me for years because I hadn't seemed to embrace its simple tenet. Possibly, the universe was helping me rectify this wrong (assuage my procrastination guilt) because as I jogged, the covenants of my contract literally took shape in my mind. As soon as I got home, I raced upstairs to write them down.

The following values became the five elements of my “mommy contract”.

1. I get to have my own identity.

Women (in particular) have long struggled with the choice between having a career or not. I had a career for about 15 years prior to having children and it was a large part of my identity (and my sense of independence – see #3). Fortunately, I started a training business nearly a decade ago which provides me tremendous flexibility but also allows me to continue to define an identity completely separate from my role as wife or mother. I truly enjoy having an identity that is not completely a function of someone else, and I've decided that that's ok...better than ok actually. This career identity means that I won't always look to my family for a sense of worth or validation, and although I'm no mental health professional, that seems like a very healthy way to navigate life.



2. Family trumps work.

Having clearly agreed that “*I get to have my own identity*”, I also needed to clearly decide that I’m not pursuing career success at the expense of family. As an entrepreneur who regularly makes decisions impacting my business model, travel schedule, scope of services, etc., it’s important that I have this value front of mind every day. One mistake that I’ve seen so many successful women (and men) make is falling into the trap of continuing to pursue more and more in their career without consciously thinking about what the additional compensation, responsibility, clients, business is really *costing* them. For entrepreneurs in particular I feel there’s a constant subliminal pull to continue to “grow” your business and build an “empire”, but an empire can turn into a prison if you’re not careful. I decided early on quite honestly to work as little as possible to meet my career goals and instead “grow” my business through various passive revenue options. This approach provides me the ability to prioritize family over work. For me this means picking up my kids from school daily (with very few exceptions), spending weekends doing fun things with the family (instead of running errands which I take care of during the week), minimizing business trips, being actively involved with my children’s school, and making sure that we take vacation time every other month. And when posed with difficult choices in the future where it seems like a “family vs. work” choice, I’ll choose family.

3. I can take care of myself always.

For better or worse, independence is extremely important to me. Although I’m completely committed to the partnership of marriage and the inherent interdependence that comes with that, I am invigorated by the reality that I can take care of myself so I choose to embrace that value. For me this value didn’t necessarily represent actions I wanted to take or things to do differently but more a matter of holding up a mirror to myself, voicing the value, and accepting it. I remember early in my marriage consulting with my husband about his “covering” expenses that I normally paid for a few months while I took an extended maternity leave, and I really didn’t like that feeling. Again, I’m all for partnership and working together, but I also like the feeling of knowing that ultimately I can take care of myself always. For me this manifested as my establishing a “cushion fund” for myself and my business so that I don’t have to worry about the ups and downs of small business owner cash flow or feel that I have to “ask” about making a particular purchase. I just like the feeling of being able to take care of myself always.

4. I keep promises to myself.

Sometimes (as women in particular) I think that we feel a bit guilty when we’re doing things for ourselves like jogging, going to the hair salon, getting a massage, even having lunch with a friend. And certainly society seems to judge certain activities as “important” (working, going to school, etc.) and others as “not important” (taking an organic cooking class, reading a leisure book, etc.). Yet, we all know that some of these “personal investment” activities help us maintain a sense of balance, happiness, and peace. I think that it’s really important that you consider where you are in your career, your level of financial security,



responsibilities as you decide what promises you should make to yourself...because you need to keep them and doing so will likely mean that you won't spend time in other areas. For me because I have the luxury of working part time in my business, I have a bit more free time than most. Instead of filling that time with working more, I made a conscious decision to use that time honoring #2 and #4. So, I'm quite committed to picking up my kids daily, taking Ari for a treat after school a few times a week, strolling on the Beltline on weekends with the family, but I'm just as committed to keeping promises to myself as well. Therefore, my pilates class and jogging excursions aren't complete luxuries that I'll let myself indulge in when everything else is done. They're appointments that I put on my calendar and try my best not to miss just as I would treat any other commitment.

5. I don't sweat the small stuff.

I decided a while ago that we each have a limited amount of energy, and we must be very judicious about how we spend it. I use the "don't sweat the small stuff" principle in two ways. First, it helps me decide where to put my energy (e.g. what to do) and secondly, it helps me *really* let go from feeling pangs of guilt about anything that I'm not doing. So, if I'm not going to join a board or attend a holiday party, or attend a conference I don't want to mentally obsess about it and instead funnel that energy into whatever I *am* doing.

The beauty of a Mommy Contract is that it's yours. It's very personal. No one can tell you what to include in it, and it really should be a reflection of your values, priorities, and lifestyle. Some of these values I probably knew I held, but there's something so powerful about acknowledging them by documenting it as a contract with yourself. For me, I plan to print and display it prominently so that when I'm faced with day to day decisions, choices, and options, I can measure those against my contract. I think that I was blessed early on to have the insight to realize that you truly have to design the life that you want. It doesn't just fall into your lap. As my life became more complex with more responsibilities and roles, I couldn't seem to manage it as easily without defined structure. For me the *Mommy Contract* just helps remind me daily that I'm not simply a means to serve others, but I get to consciously choose how I expend my energy, my time, and my space. It helps ground me....and with so many balls in the air all the time, grounding is good ☺

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