



# The Art of Practicing - Part II

## (a case in time)

article by Michael Smolens ©2009

Here's an illustration of how I worked with one student to create more clarity around their Optimal Practice Times along with the Purposes of The Practice Log.

Wes is a busy contractor whose reputation is growing quickly. He came into the lesson confessing that several new projects had really taken their toll, and that he had not touched his lesson assignments the whole week.

When I asked him to commit to three Optimal Practice Times, he wrote down three choices:

1st choice — 5:00am

2nd choice — 6:30pm

3rd choice — 9:30pm

I asked him, "Are you sure these times reflect your true preferences based on a completely free schedule, versus times that are based more on adaptations to your current schedule? You mentioned how your first choice happened before anyone in your family was awake, and your second choice was right after work. Have you ever had a stretch of time without a heavy work load to get a clear idea of your preference?"

"Yes I have, about nine months ago for a month when things were very slow. I got in a lot of practicing and the timing really worked."

"Wes, I know first-hand how demanding running your own business can be. It really can be challenging when things get busier because there's always the fear in the back of your mind that if you don't work full-out, the bottom will fall out, right? OK, so just put yourself back into that time when you had lots of free time, and from that, create a true set of Optimal Practice Times."

"Well, it would look more like this:

1st choice — 9:00am,

2nd choice — 1:00pm, and

3rd choice — 6:00pm,

...but that's simply not possible. I've got to be on-site at 8:00a.m. throughout the day, so I don't see how my 9:00am preference could work."

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“You might think that everything is set in stone, but my experience has been that people actually have more flexibility than they might think. The next step is to write down what in your schedule *could* be shifted to accommodate these revised Optimal Practice Times. What are some possible changes that might allow you to practice at 9:00am? Don’t worry about acting on any of these — just go for it!”

After some discussion, here’s what he wrote as possible actions and shifts in schedule to support his first choice:

- 1) hire a project manager
- 2) build a sound-proof practice shed
- 3) practice in my office
- 4) practice in my van next to a park close to a project site
- 5) schedule only two days during 1st choice time

“So it looks like you *could* do much of your initial on-site supervision before your 9:00am target time, right?”

“Yes. In fact, there are days when I can check in with my crew just by phone.”

“Didn’t you say that if you brought on a project manager that would free you up to generate new clients and projects? And isn’t that the aspect of your business you want to shift your attention to?”

“Yes, that’s where I want to be heading.”

“I recall you started as a cabinet maker and then created your own factory in the Philippines. Well, successful entrepreneurs tend to want to create more opportunities and new challenges — that usually means less actual hands-on time because you’ve already experienced the whole ladder of jobs that have contributed to your success. A parallel situation from the musical theatre world would be someone that starts as a pit musician, moves up to conducting, graduates into composing the music and text, and then finally produces a new work which involves making all of (or nearly all of) the creative decisions. So as a general contractor with employees, managing your time takes on a different significance than when you were just a cabinet maker. All of the critical negotiations with your current clients, employees, prospective clients, cutting-edge manufacturers, etc. demand more balanced and considered leadership.”

“I’m becoming much more aware of this, and my wife is also pointing this out to me.”

“Wouldn’t it be fair to say that keeping up your music is a key ingredient to staying more balanced? Practicing an instrument as physical as the saxophone not only enhances your health, but it also can reignite your creativity, which will inevitably rub off onto your business life. OK, let’s get back to your list of possible actions to facilitate your first-choice practice time. Do they still seem more outrageous, or more do-able?”

“They look entirely do-able. Actually, I’ve been learning when my input is most needed at a job. It’s not as constant as I used to think.”

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“And if you had a project manager, they could check items that are more routine, right?”

“Yes. I’m looking back at my list and I’m seeing that committing to two weekdays per week doesn’t seem out-of-the-question.”

“Right, and if you combine that with some practicing on Saturday and Sunday, plus your time with me here at your lesson, *you’ve got five days a week, my friend!* I think now would be a good time to identify your top three purposes for using your practice log, so take a minute to read through all of the purposes and tell me which three really hit home the most.”

After thinking for a while Wes said, “Well, this is what I’m thinking:

1st — acknowledging my practicing as an accomplishment,  
2nd — distinguishing my feelings/thoughts/assessments from the results, and  
3rd — observing my practice patterns.”

“In that order?”

“Yes.”

“Just so you know, I rarely question a student’s response to the prioritization process, but I’ve got to say that I’m a little suspicious. I think that there’s a purpose that’s so fundamental to your relationship to your practicing that you’re not quite seeing it. From what you’ve described to me, I bet that your real first priority is scheduling your practice times and durations.”

“Holy Cow, now that you point it out, you’re right! Alright, here’s my new order:

1st — scheduling my practice times and durations,  
2nd — observing my practice patterns and priorities, and  
3rd — acknowledging my practicing as an accomplishment.”

“Take a look, you’ve created a whole new orientation of emphasis for yourself about what is going to now catalyze your practicing. From managing your emotional and conceptual relationship to your music to actually committing to schedule your practice times. That’s a major shift.”

“It’s like someone just turned all of the street lights on. Thanks!”