

Gustavo A. Calderón

Enjoy Life to the Fullest

Some called him crazy. Others called him bold. But as Gustavo Calderón sailed—metaphorically speaking—through the air, he knew he had been right to leap without a parachute. The world of his aspirations lay beneath him, the details growing more vivid and recognizable with each passing second.

It was not a plane the 35-year old professional had jumped from, but a partnership track at Ernst & Young, LLC. He had been with the company for five years and was exceling as a senior manager, when he had stopped and looked around for the first time. “I was a single guy flying all over the world, working on complex IT projects and being considered for the ultimate promotion,” he says today. “But then I started to think, what was life as a partner really like? Was there enjoyment along with so-called success? Did partners have enviable family lives and great marriages? Did they have time to excel and push the envelope on non-work interests?”

The more Gustavo observed, the more he realized that most partners—bosses, mentors, and coaches who had what’s traditionally considered a “successful” life—were only accomplished in terms of work. They lived and worked within a very well-defined partnership system, but that system was not designed for the “good life.” Their families, health, and leisure time too often took a back seat to work commitments. And, while there were a few partners that were outliers and were indeed living the good life, most had bought into the “partner life,” as Gustavo called it.

“If I pursued the partner track, my 70-hour workweek would certainly not decrease, because the partner life doesn’t leverage time effectively,” Gustavo explains. “A partner’s practice and a partner’s book of clients still require much care, attention, and involvement from the partner. There’s no such thing as an ‘absentee partner,’

whereas a business can be designed with systems that are options for freeing up the business owner from the daily grind. I just didn’t see the point. Why devote the best years of your life when, you have the most vitality, health, and energy, to just work? Many people do it with the hope of some unpredictable payout, or perhaps the promise of a comfortable retirement in the golden years. I really enjoyed the consulting work I was doing as a senior manager, and I knew I was good at it. So I thought, why not work for myself while leveraging my experience such that my output is not directly proportional to my hourly input or my time investment?”

Gustavo knew he had the knowledge and work experience to make it on his own, so he decided to make the jump. Living in San Francisco, he called his mentor, the man who would likely have sponsored him for the partnership, and told him he was resigning.

“What? Are you joking? Where are you going?” asked the

partner.

“Well, you may think I’ve lost my mind,” Gustavo said, “but I don’t know exactly where, or who will be my first client. What I do know is that I’ll start with a scuba diving trip to Malaysia.”

“You *have* lost your mind!” the partner shouted. It was the same reaction Gustavo received from his father.

Being a company man was the only kind of life his father had ever known. “When I told him of by nebulous plans, he thought I needed psychiatric help,” Gustavo recalls. “I was perhaps a couple years away from making partner, and he reminded me that people don’t just throw that away. I had always admired his path as valedictorian through K-12 school, college, and post-graduate studies, and on to respected positions and distinguished professional accomplishments, but it was all too structured. It



had worked for him, and through it all he had been a very good provider for the family. But it wasn't the path or the lifestyle for me."

Many entrepreneurs build a bridge to their new venture before leaving the safety of their prior employment, but not Gustavo. He had no debt and nearly two years-worth of salary saved up, and all his financial affairs were in order. He put all his possessions in storage and set up automatic payments for his credit cards, and opened up a P.O. box. For three glorious months, he travelled throughout Malaysia and was as free as a human being can be, with no responsibilities, no email, and no phone—just a calling card. "Regardless of what happened after that, it was all worth it just to experience that time of complete freedom, peace, and tranquility," he reflects.

Gustavo incorporated his company, Acquisition Workforce, Inc., on January 20, 1998, and for the seven years that followed, he surrounded himself with senior IT experts that he pulled onto various projects as freelance workers. Several had retired from high tech companies and reputable consulting houses, and others had become subject matter experts through other means. Together, they picked up large-scale IT projects that were faltering and needed to be turned around. Gustavo became an expert at assembling these "SWAT teams" all over the country, traveling from site to site and project to project as needed. It was also a life of freedom, as Gustavo learned to generate a nice revenue stream that was not tied directly to the number of hours worked in a week. He was now leveraging his time, which freed up time to train for demanding athletic competitions. And with new free time, Gustavo opened himself to the possibility of marriage.

He married Adriana, and soon, they were expecting their first child. The constant business travels, which had been desirable and necessary up to that point, were not conducive to starting a family, so he wondered if he could tweak his business model to make his work more Washington-focused. He didn't have a network in the region, so he began to look for inroads into the government contracting realm. "It wasn't easy," he recalls. "I didn't know anyone in government, and selling in the private sector is completely different from selling in the federal space. But being home more often than not was a top priority for me, so I set my mind to figuring it out."

In his efforts to gain a foothold, Gustavo focused the vast majority of his time and resources on a four-year, \$4 million contract with the Department of Interior to recover a large financial systems implementation project. After almost two years of effort, he finally received word that he had succeeded in landing the contract. It was the stroke of success that would allow Gustavo to step beyond freelance workers and hire his first six employees, truly building a company.

Within 24 hours of the contract award, however, he got a call from the contracting officer saying there had been a mistake. The contract was supposed to go to another company, but the client was so impressed with Gustavo's personal capabilities that they insisted the prime contractor hire him as a subcontractor.

With signed contract in hand, Gustavo knew the back-step was out of the ordinary, even though he was new to government contracting. Still, he acquiesced when the rival company asked to meet with him. They offered him a subcontracting job on the contract and a generous salary, but they had also been asked to resubmit their proposal, and they tried to strong-arm him into sharing the plan he had put together. The meeting turned sour when the firm implied that if he didn't take the offer, he might never work in DC again. "We had a one-year-old child at home, with another on the way," Gustavo recounts. "My wife had quit her job, and we had no income. I was faced with this pivotal decision—should I take the job being offered by this large company that had used less than professional or ethical means to arrive at the offer, or should I stick to my principles and risk it? I went back to Interior and told them I couldn't work for that firm because we had not been able to arrive at a mutually beneficial agreement. If Interior wanted me, my team, my proposed solutions, and my services, they needed to come directly to me and award the contract to my company."

Gustavo risked everything, and he agonized over the span of several business days as the agency figured out what to do. But in the end, they came back and named him the award-winning vendor. Interior has been a client of Gustavo's ever since that contract was officially awarded to his company in October of 2005, and he has since expanded to other agencies like U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the General

Services Administration, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, among others.

In addition to turnaround projects, Acquisition Workforce helps government agencies to best manage their capital investments. Specializing in requirements gathering and packaging information to convey an accurate picture of an agency's status quo and needs, Gustavo and his team can help discern what programs are worth pursuing and how to ensure agencies get a return on their investments. Then, once the investment is won and the work is handed off to a contractor, Acquisition Workforce stands hand-in-hand with the agency to ensure the vendors do right by the client. "The government often does a very bad job at defining requirements in its solicitations," Gustavo explains. "We take pride in our ability to package solicitations with great clarity, which garners strong and precise proposals that are actually of value to the agency. We've found a very important market niche here, and we love the work because we get to ensure good stewardship of taxpayer dollars. That's time and resources very well spent."

From day one, Gustavo has built his company with a philosophy of complete devotion to the clients it serves through valuing his employees as highly as possible. "If my employees are doing good work for the client, I want to compensate them far more than anyone else in the industry would," he explains. "I've never lost an employee because they were offered more money somewhere else. People try to tell me that it's no way to build a sustainable business—that they would pay their employees as little as possible to get the biggest margin. But I think valuing people is the strongest business model there is. I want my employees to know that I treat them the very best I can, so that they can focus on satisfying the needs of the client and doing a good job."

The balance sheet of the company is therefore a reflection of Gustavo's deepest values. While other small business owners in the industry are more concerned with trimming labor costs and cutting benefits, he hires the best people for the job, even if they aren't the cheapest. "I like to think of the company as my extended family," Gustavo says. "Companies will often say that their employees are their biggest assets, but that's usually just lip service. In my personal experience, I was always taken care of by the companies I

worked for, but I also always felt that they could have been doing better by their employees. I promised myself that if I ever started my own company, I'd do better. So today, I provide excellent employment to a select few individuals who are incredibly loyal, and that formula allows us to do outstanding work." Acquisition Workforce is now a team of 21 employees doing \$4.1 million in sales per year. It has held steady at this size for the past five years, though Gustavo is considering moves that could double or triple the company in the near future.

As President of Acquisition Workforce, Gustavo discarded traditional notions of time allotment in favor of personal choice and accountability. Vacation is an obsolete term as he intuitively discerns the appropriate time for work and play. "I look at my work as something I thoroughly enjoy doing," he says. "I love working Saturdays and Sundays without interruption, and when I feel it's time to step out of the office, I do that. In all my years with the company, I've never had the Monday blues. There's no sense of TGIF, because why not TGIM? It's a very healthy relationship where I never feel weary of the work. It's always enjoyable."

Gustavo's workdays are peppered with rigorous athletic activity, which forms a foundational cornerstone of his identity. Monday mornings often find him on an intense three-hour bike ride, training for his annual 130-mile, 15,000-foot climb, day-long cycling challenge. For nineteen years in a row he has successfully finished such events in the California Sierras or the Colorado Rockies. On Wednesday afternoons, if he doesn't have a meeting, he's out riding again. "Nothing contributes more to a person's well-being and happiness than exercise," he affirms. "Cycling, swimming, skiing, running—they all help make me a better person."

While Gustavo tossed out the typically-prescribed life map long ago and has since operated according to his own set of blueprints, his early life was lived considerably more by the book. He was born in Cali, Colombia, where his hardworking but risk-averse father was the head of a large power utility company. His mother stayed home to raise Gustavo and his three younger sisters, and was also an avid tennis player. "My fondest memories from childhood are of spending entire weekends at the country club, where my sisters and I were all on the swim team,"

Gustavo recounts. "I was a strong swimmer and had a very nice group of friends. I remember my father giving us talks about cutting back on the number of hamburgers we ate at the club. It was a nice childhood in an upper-middle-class environment."

Gustavo was always a very organized, studious child, mirroring his father's work ethic. The books in his bedroom were lined up in order of height, and there was hardly ever a toy out of place. His sisters, who were decidedly messier, would joke that he had been adopted, and his parents would chastise them for not being more like their brother. "Back in Colombia in the 1970s, we had only three TV networks, so there wasn't a lot of exposure to the world the way there is today with constant social media and information flow," he points out. "I swam competitively, and even represented my country in a few international swim meets. I played tennis and rode my bike around the neighborhood, never really thinking about what I wanted to do when I grew up."

Gustavo was eleven years old when his father accepted a two-year assignment with the Inter-American Development Bank in August of 1974. The family moved to America and settled in Rockville, Maryland, where the two-year commitment turned into an indefinite stay. With no drivers, no maids, no cooks, and no country club, life in the US was decidedly different for the Calderóns, but Gustavo didn't miss those things. He did, however, lament that he was no longer the cream of the crop as a swimmer. "I thought I was a shoe-in for the Rockville-Montgomery Swim Club team, one of the largest and most successful swimming teams in the United States, but the coach said I had a chance of making it next year if I came in before and after school to swim every day," he recounts. "It was a huge time commitment for my parents and me, and while I really enjoyed the sport, I was not ready to devote my entire life to the training regimen the coaches were proposing, which demanded far and beyond grit and determination."

Instead, Gustavo started playing on youth soccer teams and applied his strong work ethic to his schoolwork. He picked up paper routes, mowed lawns, and later got a job at a sporting goods store so he could take advantage of the employee discounts. Most of the money he earned went toward ski equipment and trips in high school. He always imagined he'd go to college

because he understood life to have one path toward success—do well in high school to get into college, and do well in college to get a good job. "Nobody told me there were other ways to be successful," he reflects. "I wish I had known that that was only one of many ways, and that I didn't have to be so programmed in my approach."

In college at the University of Maryland (UMD), Gustavo gravitated toward math and pursued a degree in Operations Research and Statistics. He spent his summers making good money as a carpet cleaner, and spent one summer as a construction worker doing the arduous labor of building swimming pools. When he graduated in 1985, he was hired by Bechtel Power Corporation, among the largest construction and engineering companies in the world, as a planning and scheduling engineer working with all engineering disciplines in maintenance of nuclear power plants in Maryland, Massachusetts, and Ohio. The company paid for Gustavo to get his Master of Science degree in Information Systems at UMD, and he left in 1988 to take a position at Andersen Consulting, now Accenture. "When I got there, I remember being in a class of around thirty new hires," Gustavo recounts. "As part of the indoctrination, a partner told us, 'We love when our consultants get married because it shows a sign of maturity, and we love when they get divorced because it shows a sign of commitment.' We didn't know if it was a joke or not. I don't recall if anyone laughed, but we all knew the road ahead was going to be intense – and that's exactly what we all had signed up for."

From there, Gustavo was heavily recruited to join a British consultancy called James Martin Associates, where he made a name for himself excelling in the "IT panacea" of that period—Information Engineering enabled by the use of Computer-Aided Systems Engineering (CASE) tools. A few years later, Ernst & Young sought him out, and he worked there for his final five years as an employee. "I entered the consulting field for the diversity of experience and greater perceived professional challenges, and because I thought I'd get the chance to travel. I was certainly right about all that," he says. "Life was good, very good, but it was not great. I did not want to change my craft, but I was yearning for autonomy and self-determination. I started realizing that the only way was to venture out on my own."

Gustavo made the leap in 1998, and two

years later, he met Adriana. “I owe so much of my success to Adriana and her unwavering support,” he affirms. “My boldness in pursuing the government contracting work, even when it was so risky, would not have been possible without a wife who was 100 percent supportive.”

Shortly after he landed that first contract with Interior, Gustavo was offered an opportunity to design a project management curriculum and courseware for federal employees and industry. Though he had never taught formal classes to the professional workforce, he recalled fondly his statistics teaching assignments to undergraduate students while he pursued his masters degree. Today, Gustavo finds immense satisfaction in teaching seminars through his own company, where training is a core offering, and seldom turns away speaking engagements at government and industry forums in the US and abroad.

Acquisition Workforce has only grown stronger since its initial foray into government contracting, and Gustavo would pit the quality of its culture against that of any other company. “I’d love to challenge my business-owner peers to a simple bet,” he laughs. “If Gallup were to poll our respective companies, I bet I’d score higher when it comes to having more genuinely engaged and happy employees. And compensation is only a small factor in that equation.”

Gustavo’s daring as an entrepreneur is only matched by his daring in athletics. After years of extreme skiing and cycling, a friend and former Ernst & Young colleague encouraged him to become a long distance runner. “I wasn’t afraid of pain or hard work, but I was definitely afraid of marathons,” he recounts. “Then one day I was listening to a podcast while riding my bike, and it was talking about the importance of doing things that scare you. I thought, what scares me? Marathons. So as soon as I finished that ride, I signed up for a marathon four months down the road. I didn’t even have the proper shoes, but I knew I had to do it. In an odd way, signing up to run my first marathon was scarier than venturing out on my own in business without a safety net. It was probably one of the most life-changing things I’ve ever done, opening up a whole new world to me of these incredibly disciplined people with extreme grit and determination.” In the five years since completing his first marathon in 2011, Gustavo has run five additional marathons, including the exhilarating and world famous New

York City Marathon, and he’s currently training for his first Ironman.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Gustavo highlights the importance of exposing yourself to as many different experiences as possible—a life mantra he tries to impart to his sons, aged fourteen and twelve, and to his eight-year-old daughter. “Travel as extensively as you can, and go experience other cultures,” he encourages. “Take on as many different kinds of jobs as you can through your life. It will open your world. Don’t do what I did and get stuck in a big job with only four weeks of vacation a year. See the world while you can, however you can. And do something that scares you every three months, if not on a more frequent basis. It took me years to get the courage to run that first marathon. I wish I had done it earlier, when my body could recover faster.”

Beyond that, Gustavo’s example demonstrates the importance of understanding the constraints of the systems within which we operate. “Sometimes we can change those systems,” he says. “Sometimes we can’t. When I realized I couldn’t change the systems I was encountering in the partner life, I decided to create my own—one that facilitated my idea of happiness. I’ve designed a company with happiness woven into its very structure. It’s a company that enables its employees to grow and its clients to be stronger. And it’s a company that values people, encouraging them to enjoy life while it’s theirs to live. To me, that’s success.”

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