



Episode 1: The Transition

Conversations on Leadership

April 2022 | Podcast Transcript

Overview

The three-episode [Conversations on Leadership](#) series explores PRA's upcoming leadership transition. In May 2022, Senior Vice President Sarah Desmarais, PhD, will become the firm's President; current President Pamela Clark Robbins will retire in December 2022. *Conversations on Leadership* explores the upcoming transition, the evolution of PRA over the past 35 years, and what the future holds for themselves and the organization.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

Welcome to *Conversations on Leadership*, a three-part series produced by Policy Research Associates, commonly referred to as PRA. I'm Nicole Vincent-Roller, a Senior Communications Specialist at PRA. In this series, I'll be speaking with retiring President, Pamela Clark Robbins and incoming President, Sarah Desmarais. We'll discuss their leadership transition, the evolution of PRA over the past 30 years, what the future holds for the organization, and their reflections on leadership.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

In this episode, Pam, Sarah, and I will discuss the upcoming leadership transition at PRA. After 35 years here, including six as President, Pam will retire this May and Senior Vice-President, Sarah will take over as president. It's a big moment in our firm's history, a moment that both Pam and Sarah have been carefully planning for over the past few years. Let's start our conversation with them to learn more.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

Pam, tell us about your search for a successor. How did you learn about Sarah and why did you think that she was the right fit for the role?

Pam Robbins:

Thanks, Nicole. When I took over this role six years ago, I was already focused on what's next for PRA. I wanted to identify who could be the next leader after I exited, because I knew my term wasn't going to be particularly long. So I began by making a list of the qualities that I'd want to see in the leader of PRA, the kind of substantive knowledge they might have, the sort of professional experience that they would need to run two businesses, a for profit and a nonprofit. And what I was really looking for was someone who could have a level of gravitas in the field and really take PRA to the next level.

Pam Robbins:

So I made a list. I made a list of people who were potential candidates. I made a list of people and organizations that I could reach out to, to solicit nominations. I asked people internally who they might view as the next leader of PRA. And after I had the list, I rank ordered those in terms of who I wanted to start talking to. Now, mind you, this was 2018. So several years ago, and Sarah was number one on my list. The reason I kind of honed in on Sarah from the beginning was because of her experience. Sarah, as you all know, is a PhD in forensic psychology. She has peer-reviewed publications, numbering over a hundred. She's been in leadership positions when she was at NC State. And she was well known to me through the circles I travel in that are really the intersection of behavioral health and criminal justice.

Pam Robbins:

I had met Sarah, I think about 10 years ago at an APLS meeting. That's the American Psychology Law Society, which is Division 41 of APA, and seen her do a couple of presentations there and was just terribly impressed with her approach to research and her ability to translate research into usable findings, and then convey that information to a pretty varied audience of lawyers and psychologists and practitioners. And so I made a plan to start with Sarah and talk with her about whether or not there might be any interest on her part in taking over, or coming to PRA at that point.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

And how did you end up reaching out to her?

Pam Robbins:

We were at an APLS meeting in Portland, Oregon in 2019. And I texted her before the meeting and asked her if she'd join me for pre-dinner drink, oysters at a nice little place, just up the street from where the meeting was being held. So Sarah came into the meeting and I literally, I don't think I had seen her for, I don't know, several years at that point, came into the room and just had a presence about her. We sat down, we started talking about this. We made a lot of chit-chat. I love oysters, you love oysters, that sort of thing. And then I broached the fact that I was going to be retiring from PRA, at the time I thought around 2023, and that I was in the hunt for a successor. And much to my surprise, she jumped all over it. And she said, "I can't believe that you brought this up," or I'll let her say it in her words in a minute, but needless to say she had interest.

Pam Robbins:

And so our conversations began and we continued those through the year in 2019 into 2020. And when we had both had a number of meetings and conversations about it, and we were both feeling super positive about it, we actually entered into an agreement in 2020, right in March when the pandemic broke out. So thank goodness COVID didn't get in our way of making these plans and moving forward. But we entered into agreement where she'd come to PRA as Senior VP and then really work on developing the research area in PRA. And then, if everything went well and she was a good fit and loved

PRA, then we'd look at moving her into the president role when I retired. And she was on board, I was on board. And probably one of the best professional decisions I've ever made was to execute that in 2020, and then have everything flow from there.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

Long time in the making. Sarah, what were the early conversations between you and Pam like?

Sarah Desmarais:

Incredibly exciting. Pam is almost overstating it. I think I had sat down for 90 seconds and said, "I'm in."

Pam Robbins:

That's true.

Sarah Desmarais:

I'd love to say that I had a really more thoughtful, planful decision process, but the minute she brought it up, I was ready for something like this and ready for PRA specifically. I mean, I've known about PRA for 20 years. I've been citing work by people at PRA and Hank Steadman first, and then others, including Pam since I was a graduate student. So this was a place I'd always had my kind of sight set on that I'd love to work there and even looked into a job as I was graduating and coming out of my PhD. And there just wasn't anything at that time. And cut to almost 15 years later and here I am.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

Do you want to talk a little bit about your experience and research interests?

Sarah Desmarais:

Sure. Pam covered some of my experience in research interests, but I am a PhD in forensic psychology. And again, that's where I really saw a lot of what PRA was doing. We were assigned readings in class from work that was being done here. And then after that, I actually took a bit of a shift and I really wanted to focus less on the individual level. I was seeing a lot of folks with very similar stories in the settings I was working in and a lot of homelessness and child abuse and early substance use. And I was getting to the point where I wanted to see, is there a way that we could do more effective change at maybe a system level?

Sarah Desmarais:

So I went into public health for post-doctoral training and really trying to get that bigger picture system, kind of macro perspective. And then from there, I took a dream job really at the University of South Florida, where I was jointly appointed between the Department of Mental Health Law and Policy and between a Department of Community and Family Health. And in fact, that's where I met Hank. So Hank

was a faculty advisor on the grant that hired me and we had some early conversations and I was just so excited to meet one of my professional heroes, and then to hear even more about the work that was going on here. And it was through that, I think right near there that Pam and I ended up meeting at a conference through Hank.

Sarah Desmarais:

We left the University of South Florida after a few years and went up to North Carolina State where I was on faculty in psychology. I really was drawn back to the psychology. It's a real passion of mine. And I worked my way through the ranks in that department. So I was an assistant professor, then I was an associate professor, and I finally achieved the rank of full professor, which is the dream. And through that time, I was also doing various things in terms of leadership. So I was running our doctoral program and applied community psychology and social psychology. And after a few years from that, I stepped into more leadership. I really wanted to try to get back into more of that system level kind of focus and work and went into the role of a center director. So I directed the Center for Family and Community Engagement for several years.

Sarah Desmarais:

But I always had this feeling that I wasn't going to stay in academia forever. And it was truly when I was really thinking about like, what's that next thing, what am I going to do that Pam reached out and we went out for drinks and oysters, and I said, "I'm in."

Pam Robbins:

And you can see why I thought she was a perfect fit, because one of the things that I had in my head when I was making this list about who would be a good leader of PRA is kind of who's the next Hank Steadman? Initially I felt like I was sort of a placeholder president between Hank Steadman and whoever the next leader would be. Turns out I was a good person to have, as we struggled with kind of evolving the PRA culture and all the issues around COVID and DEI and all of that during my tenure here.

Pam Robbins:

But Sarah really is kind of the embodiment or the next version of the Hank Steadman in the law, mental health research field. And people view her that way. They turn to her for her expertise. And part of that is because she has this combination of doing the research and there's a lot of smart people out there, respected people who do the research, but not a lot who translate it into practice. And Sarah had that rare combination of translating research into practice, doing the kind of technical assistance work we do. She didn't talk too much about the training, but she does a ton of training around the country on all the areas that she is expert in. And so she was familiar with that training and TA aspect of PRA.

Pam Robbins:

The other thing is, she hits on every one of the substantive areas we focus on. Not only is it violence and mental illness and behavioral health, not only is it the broader criminal justice issues, the family center that she mentioned, but she's even done and published work on veterans, which is another key area, substantive area for PRA. So she hits all the areas and kind of hits all the action in those areas. I think she was kind of modest in talking about herself and what a good fit she is.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

And after your tenure, as president, did it feel important to you to keep PRA as a woman-owned business?

Pam Robbins:

I can't lie. That was pretty high on my list. It's one of the accomplishments I'm very proud of is transforming that over to a woman-owned business. We have other shareholders here at PRA who are women, and they probably would've held the majority of the stock, even with someone coming in, who was a man, but the definition of a woman-owned business is that there's a woman at the helm who's managing the day-to-day activities and major decisions about the business. So it really needed to be a woman president to maintain that status. So it was another win-win that she happened to be a woman.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

Great. Thank you. So Pam, finding Sarah was one part of a detailed and complex transition plan. How have you been preparing for this transition over the past year and a half?

Pam Robbins:

Well, it's complex and it's complicated. One thing that complicated it a bit was the fact that I had some health issues that came up, additional health issues in 2020 and 2021. And that really pushed our plans along a bit. And fortunately Sarah was ready to leave NC State. And so was very accommodating about how those plans could go. So we shifted everything I'd say about six to 12 months earlier than we originally planned with her coming to PRA and that worked out because it's provided a nice long period of overlap for the two of us at PRA. And I think that's made the transition a bit easier, because Sarah's really had the opportunity to dive in and get to know the agency in a way that she wouldn't have, if she was only here overlapping with me for a couple months.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

And what's it been like helping Sarah get acquainted with PRA culture?

Pam Robbins:

Well, it's been easy because one of the qualities about Sarah that I didn't mention is her great fit culturally here with PRA and by culturally, I mean that she's a leader, but she's also very sympathetic and she's very cognizant of people finding balance in their lives and flexibility with getting their work done. And so she's a really good fit with PRA. So, that part of it hasn't been really any kind of introduction.

Pam Robbins:

The main sort of introduction that I've been focused on with Sarah is around the business end because we run this for-profit and a nonprofit and deal with grants and contracts and cooperative agreements with federal government and foundations and the list goes on. That part of it is a bit complex and that's a part where I excel. So we've been sort of playing off each other a bit and I've been doing some, I don't know, a bit of tutoring around the business end of things, but nothing else needed that attention. So it's been easy and really enjoyable.

Sarah Desmarais:

And I would add that Pam is underselling herself now because she is also incredibly well respected and known for how she runs this company. And I have colleagues who know and don't know Pam personally, who would say that Pam is like the one person they would want to work for. And so for me, as a woman in a field that is still to this day, very male dominated to come into first, a woman-owned company is just exciting. And then to learn from someone who does it so well and so thoughtfully, it's been really a real honor for me.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

So what has it been like working with Pam hand in hand the last few months?

Sarah Desmarais:

It has been amazing working with Pam. I am coming to the point actually thinking about more, how much I'm going to miss working with Pam when this transition is over, because it's been one of the highlights of my career. She is so thoughtful and very careful to give me details where details are needed, but also to let me just figure things out. And it's been fun. I think it's been a lot of fun, which maybe, I don't know if we expected that.

Pam Robbins:

Yeah. No, no. I mean, if I'd known that having a partner and working hand in hand with someone would be so enjoyable, I think I would've done it years ago.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

Are there any particular lessons that you've learned from Pam?

Sarah Desmarais:

I think the biggest lesson that I've learned and I've been thinking about this a lot is to really be completely honest in the moment and to not shy away from hard conversations. And that's something that I personally find challenging. I think a lot of us don't like to go into conversations knowing it's going to be difficult, but I have watched it happen and I've seen her do it in a way that is very authentic and thoughtful. And I just really have taken that to heart.

Sarah Desmarais:

The other thing that I'll add to that, that I've really learned from Pam beyond how to run a business because it is complex and it is complicated is to know also when to acknowledge that you've changed your mind, which we don't see a lot. And especially, maybe in academia, I'm used to it even less. But here to see Pam really think through an argument and hear from others and come back with a different opinion, and to really say that she's changed her mind or that the way she'd done it previously was a mistake or wasn't quite the right way, that she's figuring it out, I just so value seeing that in a leader and it's really given me a lot to emulate.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

And what have you learned about PRA or the work we do?

Sarah Desmarais:

I've learned so much. I was always so impressed with PRA and I really knew mostly the criminal justice piece of it. And now to see all the other areas of the work that is done is incredible. I think the other thing that I've learned about PRA is about the staff and the staff are so passionate and so committed to the work. And it just feels like a place where everybody is kind of jointly here for one mission. And it's incredible. It's incredible to be around people who want to work hard, who want to really succeed in making the world a better place.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

And how would you say Pam has set you up for success?

Sarah Desmarais:

Well, I think by running a fabulous company and setting up all sorts of structures is one of the ways that she's set me up for success. But this tutoring that she said, that's really been one of the ways because we've been doing it so hand in hand that it feels very much like I can go to her with questions. And this period of transition, which was all her idea, it was all about seeing if it was a good fit and then starting to hand things over and have conversations and give me backstory on how things are done and why, things that they've tried that just really haven't worked or have worked. All of those sort of anecdotes and that personal style, I've taken over leadership positions before, where there was no transition

and that was by design. And so this idea of having this kind of transition and it's a bit shorter than we thought, but it's also felt good. I think we've been progressing at the right rate to get through it.

Sarah Desmarais:

The other thing that I would add about that is seeing her do it in a time of a global pandemic and seeing how she navigates just really not knowing what's coming next, I think that's been incredible. And to have the structures in place like the council and various groups that are giving advice and weighing in on what might work and what wouldn't work and what are things that staff want, all those things, I think have put me in a place for success, but even more importantly, PRA.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

And Pam and Sarah, can you tell us a bit about what we should expect over these next few months?

Pam Robbins:

Well, I think a little bit more of the same. I mean, we've been doing this as a gradual transition. We've been working hand in hand and our plan is to continue to do that, just shifting roles a bit. So over this month, we're doing all of the meetings with program area directors and the senior folks at PRA to kind of make sure that Sarah's now involved in all of those meetings. She's been involved in a lot of the bigger meetings over the past six to nine months, but beginning now she'll start supervising those folks.

Pam Robbins:

The other big thing that's happening between April and May is we're going to be bringing on a full-time director of research, a program area director for the research area. And that's a role that Sarah had when she first came in as she was developing that area. And that's where she's really shown her great leadership skills here in PRA. But given the fact that she's going to be taking over my role in May, she's going to need to have time for that president role. So she's going to need someone who will take over that research director role. So that will be another big piece of the puzzle as we transition. But when she takes over as president in May, then there will be a whole host of other things on her plate. And I'll stick around through the end of the year to kind of be a bit of a backstop when she has questions or needs help with special projects.

Sarah Desmarais:

Yeah. I think the other thing that we have talked about is it's going to be more of the same, but just a little bit in reverse, right? So instead of Pam leading those meetings, it'll be me and I'll have Pam by my side for most of those to have that followup conversation. Whereas before it would be her explaining why she did a few things and this time it might be her giving me feedback or me sharing why I did a few things. And so just really transitioning gradually. And I so appreciate that she's willing to stick around for the full year and work on some special projects, maybe especially ones I don't want to work on.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

Sounds like a very deliberate and thoughtful process all around. Pam and Sarah, are there any parting thoughts either of you would like to share?

Pam Robbins:

Well, I think from my perspective, this is hard. I think transitions of leadership are hard and it's hard for a person, me personally, to kind of give that up when I love PRA, I love the people here, I love the work we do, but I think at the same time, it's easy because I know I'm going to be leaving PRA in great hands. And I'm fully confident that Sarah is the right person at the right moment to lead PRA forward. So the hard becomes easy because of that.

Sarah Desmarais:

I think my only parting thought would be to say, thank you. This is such an opportunity. And it really is a dream come true that I didn't quite know I had.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

Well, thank you both for your time today. It's exciting to hear about what's happening behind the scenes in the transition. The respect and admiration you have for one another really comes through. And I'm looking forward to our next conversation.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

I'm Nicole Vincent-Roller, and you've been listening to Conversations on Leadership produced by Policy Research Associates. Learn more about us and the series at prainc.com.

About

Policy Research Associates, Inc. (PRA) is a certified Women-Owned Small Business (WOSB) founded in 1987. In partnership with our sister non-profit, Policy Research, Inc. (PRI), we offer four core services: research, technical assistance, training, and policy evaluation. Through our work, we enhance systems that assist individuals with behavioral health needs on their journey to recovery.

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