



Episode 2: The Future of PRA

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 Communication 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. In this second episode of *conversations on leadership* we'll learn more about Sarah's vision for PRA. Sarah will discuss her passion for research and evidence based practices, how PRA's research and technical assistance work will inform one another and her reflections on her first year on the job. Let's jump in. Sarah, what has this first year been like for you?

Sarah Desmarais:

This first year has been really exciting. It's been full of challenges and learning new things, and that's exciting, but also just really feeling like PRA is truly a wonderful fit and where I want to be. And that this was the right move.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

And how has it been building a team of researchers?

Sarah Desmarais:

I've loved having the opportunity to build a research area from scratch. We had some great folks here already that were doing research and were split up in other areas and now to be able to bring more folks in and really have the group come together in an area has been really exciting. I have a lot of

passion for doing applied research and to be able to see that the things that we are doing and the work really being translated into practice has been great.

Sarah Desmarais:

So being able to bring folks together and think about what it is we want to work on and how we're going to work on it, especially in a global pandemic, when we're all also figuring out how to work and do this job remotely has been really, exciting is the word I keep coming back to, but invigorating, I would say. I was feeling pretty burnt out over the last several years. I think a lot of us were and really trying to figure out what kind of a next thing was going to be so that I still wanted to do the work and be excited about it. And the fact that we were able to do everything that we've done in the past year has really felt amazing. We have a really small but mighty team and we're doing really important work.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

And what would you like to share about building partnerships and collaborations since you've come here?

Sarah Desmarais:

One of the things that I've come to learn in the last year of being at PRA is how much people want to work with us. And being courted in that way, truly, with folks who want to come to collaborate with one of us, because they know us personally and know our work and our reputation, or because they know PRA more generally, and the work that we've done as a company and its reputation broadly in the field. I really was overwhelmed with the amount of interest and continue to have almost weekly conversations with new potential partners, new collaborators, who are coming after PRA because they want to work with us and, really being thoughtful and listening to Pam when she tells me that we do need to turn down opportunities sometimes. So it's been exciting.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

And what's it been like learning about the inner workings of PRA?

Sarah Desmarais:

That has been the biggest challenge for me thinking through these inner workings of PRA because it is a complex and complicated agency. So having the nonprofit, having the for-profit, I'm really impressed with the folks that are here that make it all work. And the thing that I've also come to learn is that I don't need to know everything. And that is such a feeling of relief for me. And to know that we have such good structures and people in place who I can turn to for advice and for expertise in those areas. So I don't need to be the expert in everything, which is how I've often felt before in my career, maybe if that wasn't even true. But to really have such strong people and structures in place, to get to know more about how everything works and what kind of contracts we need, what are the questions I need to ask and get answered, it's been wonderful to have folks working in collaboration like that.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

And Pam, what has impressed you about Sarah in the last year?

Pamela Clark Robbins:

Just about everything, honestly. I knew she was smart. I knew she was compassionate. I knew she would be a good leader, but I never imagined that she would pick things up as quickly as she has, particularly on the business side of things. I thought there would be a steeper learning curve there, but I think she's really managed even in her short tenure here to look for ways that the areas and the work we do can fit together. And she's looked for ways to find efficiencies. And she's just been the kind of person who hangs back a bit in the beginning rather than trying to sort of storm her way through and create new initiatives. But instead, really absorbing PRA and learning from the other folks here and then taking her vision, which is very much aligned with mine and with the direction of the leadership of PRA and been able to kind of implement things and move it forward.

Pamela Clark Robbins:

One example that I'll use is the DEI work that we've been doing over, not just since 2020, but for the past about five years. And when Sarah came in, she really took the bull by the horns in that area and used her expertise on research and measurement to work with the other folks here at PRA and put into place some checks and balances, some accountability for the leaders and management of PRA to make sure that we're being true to our DEI action plan and ideals in that area. So I think, again, she really hit the ground running and it's just been a tremendous pleasure to see over the last year how quickly she's picked everything up.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

And do either of you have any advice for other leaders who are working on a similar transition?

Sarah Desmarais:

I would start by saying that the transition period itself is so important. And I didn't have that, as I said in the previous conversation in other transitions that I've done. But to really have this staged plan has been really valuable for me. And I think Pam would agree to really get used to our roles first, me learning from her, and now as we're moving into more equal partnership and handing off to me being in the role of president in the next few months. The other thing that I would say that I never really thought about before coming to PRA is to those who might be in a position like me moving into more senior leadership positions to look to who's somebody who's in that role right now that you really admire. There is so much that I want to learn from Pam, and it isn't necessarily always the case that you want to emulate a previous leader.

Pamela Clark Robbins:

Yeah. I think the one thing I would add is that I mentioned in the earlier conversation that Sarah was the top of my list in terms of a future lead leader of PRA. And it's wonderful that that all worked out. But I think I had a long term plan for finding a person, thinking I wouldn't hit the right person who would say yes at the first approach. So I think with a leadership transition like this, having enough time to really think through what the qualities are in the leader moving forward, and then enough lead time to systematically approach people, interview people, time for them to transition and get on board.

Pamela Clark Robbins:

I think too often, these transitions need to happen really fast. If something had happened health-wise with me where I had to step down immediately, I think the process would've been a lot messier and a lot less productive and smooth. But the fact that we gave it a lot of lead time and we had these couple of years to seek out the perfect person and then to get that person on board and transition has really been a luxury that I'm not sure anyone would have, but I would really recommend if you can do it.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

And now that we have that perfect person on board, Sarah, what is your vision for PRA as you take over?

Sarah Desmarais:

Well, my first part of the vision is really to make sure PRA keeps doing what it's doing. I think it's such an incredible company. The work is so important. The way we do the work is wonderful. The thing that I want to push and that I have real passion for is making sure that the research and evaluation that we're doing is feeding into the technical assistance and training. And that the folks that are doing the technical assistance and training are telling us what they're hearing on the ground in the areas of research that are needed, or where information is lacking, or what programs we should be evaluating for more evidence.

Sarah Desmarais:

So really to make that a more synergistic and sort of reciprocal process. So I have some ideas and we're working out different ways we can do it to make sure that this is really Policy Research Associates, that the policy and research are there hand in hand, having more conversations in our agency as well across our areas, because we've gotten pretty big in the last several years. And looking for strategies to share across areas what is going on so that folks know what we're doing in research and evaluation, that we hear what's going on in the substantive areas, and we can really make sure that we're advancing the field in all these areas.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

So while our work is centered in behavioral health systems transformation, it touches on many populations with which you have conducted extensive research. Are there any exciting findings that you're looking to infuse into the work?

Sarah Desmarais:

We've been doing some really exciting work I think around risk assessment and how we communicate risk, particularly in the pretrial stage of the criminal justice system. So in that period of time where somebody has been arrested and are now awaiting their trial. And this is an area where there is just less work that's been done than other areas of risk assessment. Some of the work that we're doing is thinking about how you talk to people about the results of risk assessment and even maybe changing the language that it isn't about risk anymore, that we talk about success, that we look at ways to make sure that the people who are receiving the information are really getting information they can use, information they can understand. And that we're doing so in a way that's not just about public safety, which is important, but that it's also about social justice and that we're ensuring the best outcomes for all involved, including that person who's awaiting trial.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

So relating to social justice generally, diversity, equity and inclusion is of critical importance to PRA, and to you personally, Sarah. Can you share your thoughts on the work that PRA has done and how the work will evolve under your leadership?

Sarah Desmarais:

I really can't believe how much work has been done here under Pam's leadership in relation to DEI. And I don't say that to be flattering to Pam, but to truly just reflect that, I think PRA is at the cutting edge of this work as a company and a leader in the field in that way as well. We're known for being a leader in research and technical assistance and training, but I think as a company, we're also a leader in the DEI work. I come from working in very large public university systems where it felt like you were pushing boulders up the hill to try to get something done. And here the way that the company can be nimble, that we can really strive to move forward, to make notable change for our staff, to put that emphasis on DEI in our work with stakeholders as well has really just been a wow factor for me.

Sarah Desmarais:

And I've been doing a lot of personal training over the last several years. I want to be a better ally. I want to always do things in a way that is about inclusivity and equity. And what's been incredible here is that when I've had ideas or when I've been in trainings and I come back and I talk to Pam or others at PRA, we're doing just about everything. There are really few ideas or initiatives that are so brand new to PRA that they aren't somehow in place. And I just can't believe how forward thinking Pam has been in her leadership of PRA as it relates to DEI.

Pamela Clark Robbins:

I think that's one of the things I'm proud of. I mean, PRA is a much more diverse organization than when I took over. And I think we're all the better for it, hearing different voices, different vantage points about the work we do, and really having people that more closely reflect the populations that we serve has been a really important transition in PRA. PRA began as a research organization with one research project. And Sarah referenced this a bit when she said kind of restarting the research area. But one of the things that hasn't been something that I've been proud of is the fact that we lost that research edge. And I think we lost it when we lost several of the projects, some big funding from MacArthur and some other projects that were really had that research going on. When Hank Steadman retired, he was the principal investigator on a lot of those grants.

Pamela Clark Robbins:

So that area started to really wane at PRA. And I think what Sarah has done and accomplished over the last few months and I'm looking forward to her doing even more of over the next years is really bringing that research back to PRA. In a very short period of time she has generated, I didn't count them, but I want to at least a half a dozen pretty substantial research projects going on here and hired some excellent researchers to come on and do this work with her. And I think, rebalancing PRA, so that research is going on here and is generating some of these findings like she just talked about that can then inform the TA and training work we do is a critical part of what made us different from the beginning and a critical part of what will make us different going into the future.

Pamela Clark Robbins:

I never imagined that she would start that rebalancing and get so far along with it in the first year, but she has. So that's been pretty wonderful and I'm looking forward to seeing that even more over the next few years, as I look at PRA from the outside

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

And do either of you have any parting thoughts you'd like to share?

Pamela Clark Robbins:

I'm just really excited about the future of PRA. And I think with Sarah at the helm, we'll continue in the right direction of really making a positive impact in the lives of people who are in the systems that we're serving. And I look forward to seeing that change as an outsider.

Sarah Desmarais:

I'm also really excited as I've said several times. But what I think I'm most excited about is that I don't have a grand vision for how things are going to be different. I have visions for how they can be what they are and how they can be the same and how we can move into the future of PRA. The work

that has been done, the way it's been done is something that I want to continue. I'm not here to do something dramatically different in the next few months. I really want to see this ship moving forward and continuing doing what we do.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

Thank you for sharing your vision, Sarah, and for your perspective, Pam. Getting back to a stronger balance between our technical assistance and research work is exciting and will only strengthen than our ability to deliver high quality technical assistance across the nation. Thank you both for your time and your thoughts. 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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