



Episode 3: Pam's Reflections on 35 Years at PRA

Conversations on Leadership

May 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:

Thank you for joining us on our third and final episode in our *Conversations on Leadership* series. Today, as Pam prepares for her retirement, we're going to spend some time with her reflecting on 35 years at PRA. We'll talk about the early days of PRA, when we had one research grant, and how the work and culture has evolved over time. Let's get started. Pam, you've been an integral part of PRA since it was founded in 1987. What were those early days at PRA like?

Pamela Clark Robbins:

35 years. Wow, that's a long time. It's interesting to reflect back on that. As you said, we started with one research grant, there were just four individuals and basically, we just did it all. We had to figure it all out in the beginning. We had no idea how to apply for an indirect cost rate or how to set up all the policies and procedures that we'd need. But kudos to Hank Steadman, who had the vision and the determination and really the nerve to break us all out from the New York State Office of Mental Health, where we were doing some important work but didn't have the freedom and flexibility to pursue work that we wanted to do, and didn't have the freedom to travel to professional meetings and present that work.

Pamela Clark Robbins:

And so, we were looking for a spot to be able to do that more independently and he had the vision to be able to think about how PRA could be and what we could do independently, outside of a university setting and outside of a state department, in order to do this really important research. So, as I said, there were just four of us and we were working on one research grant, and it was just figuring things out from scratch from the beginning.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

Are there any standout moments along the way you'd like to share?

Pamela Clark Robbins:

So many, but this is a short, short conversation. So let's see, the highlights. I would say the very first big highlight for PRA was when we got the National Resource Center on Homelessness and Mental Illness. We started out with research, we had two research grants, one from NIMH, one from NIJ, as we went into our second year of PRA.

Pamela Clark Robbins:

And when we got funding for this National Technical Assistance Center, it both doubled our staff and really expanded the work we were doing to be about policy and to be about technical assistance, which ended up being a big focus of the work moving forward in the future.

Pamela Clark Robbins:

I think another big moment was the introduction of the MacArthur Risk Assessment work that really started around 1990. And the MacArthur programs, the MacArthur Foundation out of Chicago, their programs, they really tend to invest in the work they're doing so that ended up being a 10-year stream of funding for us that really provided a foundation for networking with other organizations around the country and doing national work at the research level and the technical assistance level, so that was huge.

Pamela Clark Robbins:

Later on, in the nineties, I believe it was the end of 96, we created PRI, our sister company, Policy Research, Inc. And we created that kind of as a fluke. There was another technical assistance center that was out there issued from SAMHSA, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. And at the very last moment on the funding, they wrote in that it had to go to a nonprofit and it would be the future GAINS Center, which has been a cornerstone of PRA work over the 25 years. And in order to get the GAINS Center work, we needed to either partner with a nonprofit or create one, and we said, "Well, we've done it once. Why not just create one?" So we created a nonprofit. And so I think having that sister company of PRI that could really appeal to foundations that like to give grants

and cooperative agreements to non profits, don't like to grant to for profits. So having that landing place for money that could only go to a nonprofit was another kind of critical standout moment.

Pamela Clark Robbins:

And I guess these transitions that have been happening, and they really started with Debbie Dennis and Joe Coccozza leaving about 10 years ago, eight years ago, and then Hank leaving six years ago, and now me leaving. So we had these four people who were sort of central to PRA for so many years and orchestrating that transition between the ownership and leadership and direction of PRA over this last decade has really been the other sort of standout moment. That's been a challenge and one that we've been successful in navigating.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

How has PRA culture shifted over the past 30 years?

Pamela Clark Robbins:

Again, three decades. It shifted a lot. I think 30 years ago, there was no one who was a remote employee. We were all in the office, we were working pretty much nine to five, eight to five, and we were all together here in the capital district. So I think a big shift has been realizing that people can be engaged in this work from anywhere, and that really has expanded both our pool of folks who can do this important work at PRA but also expanded our policies and the way that we operate the company from an IT perspective, from a human resource perspective, and has enabled us to think about our workforce entirely differently. With that change in workforce, and with COVID, frankly, we've been able to expand on that to really think about how we allow people to have the flexibility to balance their lives with their work, to integrate that all together.

Pamela Clark Robbins:

And we've been more flexible about our policies. We've been more flexible about how we connect with each other and how we're able to do this work at a distance and how we've adapted to not being able to travel. And I think we've set all these communication groups and processes in place that have really allowed us to foster a culture where everybody can talk with each other, they can share what they're doing and they can feel connected, even though we're not in the same place.

Pamela Clark Robbins:

Another way that we fostered the culture that's here at PRA is through enhancing our community service opportunities where we can really reach out to folks that are in populations that we serve through our research and technical assistance work, but don't do any hands on work with, so we've been able to go into shelters and cook breakfast, or have community service days that really highlight our commitment to the populations that we serve and the work that we do.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

Pam, you're approaching a major milestone with your upcoming retirement. How are you feeling about it?

Pamela Clark Robbins:

I was saying to someone earlier that I live on a street called Bittersweet Lane, and I guess that kind of characterizes how I feel about this transition into retirement, it's a bit bittersweet. I mean, I love PRA. It's almost like another child for me. I love the work here. I love the people here. And so, there is a little bit of a bitter pill just in stepping back and stepping down from that because it's so enjoyable for me. But the sweet part is really thinking about what good hands PRA is going to be in moving forward so I won't have to worry about that at all. And I'll also get the opportunity to do a lot of things that I sort of shoehorn into my life at the moment, and it's hard to make time for doing everything that I find enjoyable, so that part of it I'm looking forward to.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

Is there anything in particular you're looking forward to accomplishing in the next few years?

Pamela Clark Robbins:

Well, I love to travel. I'd like to get back to Africa again. I think I've got a list that's an arm long about all the places I'd love to visit in the world that I haven't been to. I likely won't do all of that because I've got to balance it with seeing friends that I haven't had a lot of time for, that are spread around the country, and spending time with family. I've got these four, super cute, most of the time, grandchildren who I can see spending more hours with. And I just have some personal interests around, whether it's crafty pottery or gardening or reading. And there'll be more time for all of that, so I'm looking forward to all of it.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

Well deserved. Sarah, what are some of the most valuable lessons you learned from Pam in your time working together?

Sarah Desmarais:

I've learned so much. It's hard to think about what are the most valuable lessons, but one that comes to mind immediately is that you don't have to do everything right away. That there's real value in taking a minute, taking a beat, taking a few days, to think something through. That you don't have to respond immediately to a situation or what is felt like a crisis to some, even if it is feeling like a crisis to me. That there is real important work that can happen if you just slow down a little bit.

Sarah Desmarais:

Another thing that I've really learned from Pam is this flexibility in the work, but she talked about it in relation to staff and the culture at PRA, but I think also in relation to how she is as a leader. I think she's

incredibly flexible as a leader, both in terms of the day to day scheduling of things, but also in terms of how she reacts to situations and really considers how to optimize, for lack of a better word, the policies and the practices that we have for this company to really get the best outcome for the person, and also the company. So it's like prioritizing staff wellness, which we haven't talked a lot about but there's so much focus and emphasis on employee wellness here, and that it really comes through in how she is as a leader. So those are very big lessons. She's taught me a lot of day to day things about finance and about contracting and all that kind of stuff, but it's the bigger picture stuff that I'm really taking away.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

Are there any final thoughts that either of you would like to share?

Pamela Clark Robbins:

I think I'd just like to say one more time how proud I am of everybody here at PRA and how proud I am of the work we do, and how grateful I am to have been an active participant in that for over 35 years, really most of my working career. And I'm so excited and comfortable about this transition and what's happening with PRA, and knowing that the company that we've all built that has so many good qualities and does so much good work is going to continue on in a way that we'll all continue to be proud of is just heartwarming. And I just have so many good thoughts about Sarah and her ability to do this and confidence that she can be a really great leader for PRA that I am looking forward to the transition and happy about how all this has rolled out.

Sarah Desmarais:

Well, I've already said thank you to Pam, but I wanted to also say thank you to everyone at PRA. I know that change is scary and that this change is very different change than the company has experienced. I am from the outside coming in and this is a new thing for PRA, to have someone who's in a leadership role who hasn't been here from the beginning. And I really am so thankful for how folks have welcomed me and been willing to put their trust in me and Pam, especially, but I am really excited to, and I'm really proud to be in this role and to be ready to take over.

Nicole Vincent-Roller:

Well, thank you, Pam, for reflecting on your work at PRA and paving the way for women in leadership. Congratulations on your retirement, we wish you all the best. And Sarah, we're so excited for PRA's next chapter and for what the future will bring under your tenure. Thank you both for your time.

Pamela Clark Robbins:

Thank you.

Sarah Desmarais:

Thank you.

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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