

A Year of Change: Reflections on the First Year

Conversations on Leadership

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Overview

Conversations on Leadership is a series highlighting the leaders within Policy Research. In this series, guests share their thoughts on Policy Research's work and culture and highlight how they are using the firm's strategic plan to guide their work and advance the field.

In this episode, Sarah Desmarais, PhD, reflects on her first year as President of Policy Research, shares the highlights from her first year, how Policy Research's strategic plan guides her work, the expansion of the firm's research portfolio, and what's next for her and the firm.

Sarah Desmarais:

I think the future for PRA is very bright, and one year in, I'm more excited than ever that I get to lead this organization. It's truly an unbelievable group of people and I know that our partners see that, I know that the awards we get reflect that, but the day-to-day is pretty special, too.

Holley Davis:

That was Sarah Desmarais reflecting on her first year as president of Policy Research Associates.

Welcome to *Conversations on Leadership* by Policy Research Associates, commonly referred to as PRA. I'm Holley Davis, a communications director at PRA. In this series, my colleague, Nicole Vincent Roller, talked with PRA President Sarah Desmarais, and retired president, Pamela Clark Robbins about their 2022 leadership transition. In mid-May, Sarah celebrated her 1-year anniversary as president. Sarah and I will discuss her experiences from the past year and what's next for PRA. We'll discuss PRA's transition to a remote-first organization, our people-first policies and the growth of our research portfolio this past year.

Sarah, welcome back and congratulations on your first year as president. Tell us about your first year on the job.

Sarah Desmarais:

Thank you. I really can't believe that it's been a full year honestly, and at the same time it feels like it's been so much longer because it just really feels like home. It's been a year of change and a year of a lot of new things, but I'm really proud of all the things that we were able to go through and manage within this year of change.

I think in terms of some of the highlights that come to mind, one of the first ones is that we were named the number one small employer in the *Times Union* 2023 Top Workplace. We've received this award two times before, but obviously, it's the first time that I've been here and that we've won the award, and it's really a reflection of all of the policies and practices and work that Pam and Hank did in the years before we came to this point in time, but it's really exciting for me to be able to say that we got it again and that we were recognized for all of the work that we've done to make this a people-first workforce and workplace.

We also got the Doer Award, which is very cool. This is the second time we got the Doer Award, and this award is given to the company with the highest percentage of employees who agree with the statement that at this company, we do things efficiently and well. So this is just kind of awesome because it's not just reflecting on the workplace, but it's also reflecting on the work that we do. I do want to say that the recognition and the awards from the *Times Union* are really nice, but I think what's most exciting about them for me is that it really reflects what employees feel and think about working at PRA, and for me as a leader, one of the things I want the most is for folks to want to work with us, to want to be here, to want to do the work day in and day out. It's a wonderful group of people, and honestly, I just really want them to feel like they belong and that the work that they do matters.

Some other highlights that I can think of include successfully rebidding the SAMHSA Indefinite Delivery, Indefinite Quantity, the IDIQ contract, and this is pretty technical but it's one of the things that allows us to bid on SAMHSA work, and so for us, that really just means stability and opportunities and that we can keep working towards and doing some really good work with SAMHSA for another at least 5 years to come.

Other highlights that have come to mind are the changes and transitions that we've made as a leadership team altogether, not just myself. For example, Dr. Elan Hope joining us as the Director of Research and Evaluation around the same time that I was moving into the role as president. This really brings so much to the efforts that we're doing to build and sustain research and evaluation at PRA. She brings a lot of unique and complimentary expertise and skills, and really an emphasis and expertise around qualitative and mixed methods, something that we just see as so foundational and important to all of the research that we do, but especially the work that we do with communities, really being able to listen to and hear stories and voices from people who are working in the field and also who are affected by our work. So having that expertise I think really sets us apart in terms of the research and evaluation that we can do.

The other thing that bringing Elan into this role brings is a reemphasis on youth and youth well-being specifically. This is going to be a continued direction for our research and evaluation, and I'm just thrilled that we can continue to do work with young people and really think about prevention of entry into a lot of the systems that we work in.

Another change that we've made to our leadership group in the last year includes bringing on Marianne Latz as the Chief of Staff. This is a brand new role to PRA, but this position is really about supporting

me in my role and my day-to-day, working as an advisor to me but also all of our leadership team to really think about how we can make the best decisions possible for our staff and for PRA.

A couple other things that have happened in the last year. One is about carrying forward the implementation of Pam's equity-focused policies. This was such an area of passion for Pam and such an area of work that she had so much success in, and I'm really thrilled that we're able to continue doing this good work and just pushing it forward. One example that I wanted to highlight here is that we are continuing with doing a COLA flat rate, so that we're giving the same COLA to everyone in our organization, reflecting really that with inflation and changes in prices and gas and groceries and everything that we're seeing, this is affecting people at the same rate, so we really want to be able to reflect that in a flat rate for our COLAS.

But the other thing that we changed this year is that we decided to give COLAs at the beginning of the year instead of what we used to do which was giving them at people's anniversaries. So again, just one other strategy to try to level the playing field a little bit and ensure that our staff have the resources that they need.

Another one that we're continuing to work on is how do we really emphasize and promote remote staff inclusion. We have gone to a remote-first workplace, which I'm very excited about and will talk more about later, but thinking about how we ensure that we're connected and that everybody has the resources they need, both the financial resources, the technical resources, the materials they need, but also the people resources and the connection and that sort of intangible fabric of how we do work together and how we collaborate, even if we're located all over the country.

Finally, the last thing I wanted to talk about is that we've moved. So as part of this move to a remote first workplace, we've left our headquarters in Delmar, New York, and we've moved to a coworking space in Troy, New York. The new workspace is really about collaboration and giving opportunity for staff to come together, whether it's local staff who come into the office every once in a while, or if it's about our remote staff who come into the office a couple of times a year, and having these opportunities for connection and work in a space that really is fresh, exciting, and innovative.

Holley Davis:

Wow, that is quite a lot for one year. It's definitely been exciting getting to work alongside you during this first year. The last time that you had talked with Nicole for the *Conversations on Leadership* series, you had focused a lot on your plans to strengthen PRA's research portfolio. You spoke a bit about bringing on Dr. Hope, but I'd love to hear a bit more about how the research work has expanded in this past year.

Sarah Desmarais:

And I'd love to talk about it! Research and evaluation has been an area of growth since I joined PRA, but I think especially in the last year, we've really just seen a very large increase in the work and the breadth of the work that we're doing. So under Elan's leadership in this area, we've had a really more strategic

approach to building our portfolio with a focus on larger, longer-term projects and a little bit more consideration of the areas of work that we want to get into. Some other things that we've done in the last year around research and evaluation is really thinking about how do we disseminate and share the findings of our work in a way that is meaningful and that reaches the people we want to reach? Another highlight in the research for me is thinking about all the different ways we can push the field in our dissemination of research findings.

So the graphic notes that our Communications Team put together for one of our projects is something that I'm so proud of and I have shared with so many colleagues in the field of research and evaluation. It's not something I ever would've thought of, but the visual representation of people's experiences is really game-changing in terms of understanding the impact of the work on individual people.

We are wrapping up several projects. We wrapped up an evaluation of a multi-site pilot implementation of citation in lieu of arrest in North Carolina. That was really important work, and I think our findings are pretty cutting edge and are going to influence policy in this area for years to come. We also wrapped up a multi-site evaluation focused on understanding the population of people with frequent jail contact, and really thinking about providing actionable recommendations to reduce this cyclical contact that we see in jails across the US.

Part of my vision for the future of PRA was to create not just more research and evaluation that goes external to PRA, but also to think about connection and really having a reciprocal relationship between our research and our technical assistance and training, and I'm really excited to see the strides that we've made in the last year in this particular area. We're well on our way. There's a lot of really exciting ideas that are coming to the forefront, but some of the things that we've done in the last year include having Research and Evaluation staff participate and train and provide technical assistance. We've had Research and Evaluation staff collaborate with project staff on manuscripts and projects and fact sheets and all sorts of other deliverables that we work on.

We've had a lot of really great conversation just between our Research and Evaluation staff and program area staff about other ways in which we can collaborate, so thinking about what is the research that our trainers and our facilitators would need and would want to be really able to inform the work that they do and be evidence-based in our work. We're in the early days of collaboration across program areas, but it's really exciting, and frankly, even if it's early days, I feel like we've accomplished so much, that my vision is coming together, and that's really pretty incredible.

Holley Davis:

That's wonderful. It's been so exciting to see the research being published by our colleagues, and then on the communications side, being able to work with the Research and Evaluation Area to promote it in new and exciting ways like our *Data Points* podcast. So I'm curious, what's been guiding your work during this first year?

Sarah Desmarais:

Something that was really important to me in my first year was to have something guiding my work, so beyond having a bigger picture vision for PRA, I've really been anchoring my decision-making in our strategic goals. So every year, our shareholders come together and we have a strategic planning meeting at the beginning of the year where we talk about what we want our goals for that specific year to be. So when I'm thinking about our work, I have something that I can go back to and that our area directors and other leadership can go back to and say, "Is this potential project or is this potential decision in line with our strategic goals? Does it support us getting to where we want to go?" And that's really been a driving force for me this year.

Some of the ways you can see that in practice is really leaning into our remote-first work environment. We already had several remote staff for years, and since the COVID epidemic outbreak, we've just leaned into that even more and we realized that, you know what? Our staff can do the work from wherever they are. I think that our group has really demonstrated flexibility works and that people don't need to be in an office from nine to five to produce good work to get the work done. So for us, we made that decision and I stand by it, and I hope that we'll be a leader in the field that people can look to how we've moved into this remote-first workforce. So the last several years, we've been thinking more about that, and then this year, that really was a driving force for us.

Another great example of this year's strategic plan and strategic goals in particular was right sizing, and right sizing means both in terms of people but also resources and the kind of work that we're doing, and limiting growth, not in terms of just a quantitative or numerical goal, but also thinking really about how we can have the right level of staffing to support the work in a way that is about maintaining and centering employee wellness.

This is an ongoing challenge. There's always some stress, and what we really want to try to avoid is having people reach the point of burnout, and be more mindful about preventing that in the first place, so putting the staffing, the resources and the strategies in place this year so that in years to come, we're feeling good about the level of work and we're achieving the work in a very sustainable way.

Sustainability is a term I keep coming back to. That's also part of our strategic plan, and this is, for example, something that we see in our Research and Evaluation Area, so we are focusing on fewer, longer-term projects. Another strategic goal that's been informing a lot of our work is continuing our DEI work, and so this year, one of the major efforts that's been underway is scaling up our evaluation of our DEI work. So very meaningful and concrete numbers about how we're achieving the goals that we're setting related to DEI, but also trying to get those stories and those voices and making sure that we're getting feedback from staff on how this is going.

One of the things that we're focused on this year with our DEI effort in addition to our evaluation is thinking about the people that we work with. So being intentional about our partnerships, working with partners and organizations that are like-minded in terms of our values and that really support us

in being able to be people first. That's really important to me. I want to be doing work and having our money go towards organizations that are consistent with this approach, but also with our values. So this is a long-term effort, but a really important one and one that I think is a small way that we can chip away at some of the inequities that we see in our country.

Thinking about partnerships and collaborations, you know it's not always easy, so one of the other things that we're doing a lot of work around, and that's part of our strategic plan, is to make that process easier. Easier for the people that we work with, but also easier for our staff that have to work on the behind the scenes part of that.

One thing that's really exciting, I think, and hot off the press is we've developed some AI guidance. We are thinking very intentionally about what do we feel is the right way to be using AI in our work, and then having guidance that we can share with others that we work with in that space.

We also, in a very similar way, developed guidance around how to speak conscientiously. I think this is an effort that is really critical because words really matter and can affect people in ways that you don't intend. We've been working for several years on a resource that is not a required resource, but just provides background on some of the language we use and what it might mean to people. What it also does is provide some guidance on how to redress any potential harms that you have made on others, whether intentionally or not, and I think that's really going to be an exciting product that we can keep working on and sharing with folks as we're partnering in the future.

I feel like I've said this several times before, but we really are leaning into this people-first, value-driven organization. That's part of why I wanted to be at PRA. I think that's why a lot of people who come to work at PRA come to work here. So just continuing to look for ways that we can create an environment that supports people in being their most authentic selves and allowing us to do the work in innovative and efficient ways.

Holley Davis:

Thanks, Sarah. The intentionality and the support really comes through in the policies and the practices that you and the leadership team have implemented and emphasized this past year, and I appreciate that. So what's next for Policy Research under your leadership, and what's next for you?

Sarah Desmarais:

So what's next? We're going to keep doing what we do. We are such an innovative and forward-thinking organization, so we're going to keep doing that. We're going to keep pushing the field. We're going to keep pushing our strategic plan and our efforts.

One thing that I think about a lot is that the leadership transition has officially happened from Pam's leadership as president to mine, but it is a transition and transition is a process, and while somebody can step in and out of roles, it also affects the whole organization. There's a shifting and a change and

various changes that need to happen in the organization to make it all work. So what I think is going to be part of our future is just continuing in this transition, continuing to figure out the ways that this new leadership team and me in this role can work together to really move PRA forward and build on our successes of the past.

Part of that is going to be literally and figuratively setting up and settling into our new office space. This is the first time that most of us have been in co-working spaces, and it's definitely the first time PRA has had a coworking space as a headquarters. We're looking at ways to really make this the best workplace possible for local staff, but also for our remote staff. So very interested in hearing from staff and from others and from colleagues about how do we adapt the workplace so that it benefits everyone? And I don't think anybody has all the answers to that, but we're always looking to hear and keep up on what's happening out there and think about how we can be leaders in this way.

I want to keep working on, and I know all of leadership is thinking about this, how do we support our staff, not just in this new workspace, but in the world that we live in? There is a lot of strife, there is a lot of unrest, and that has continued for several years and it's not going away anytime soon, so how do we help redress harms that have been done and improve equity? I think what is very exciting for me about being in a private organization in this particular climate is thinking about how do we become leaders and make decisions that we have the ability to do to promote equity in the workplace.

So I don't have all the answers of what that looks like and I don't pretend that we always get it right, but I think what's important is that we're continuing to try. It's slow. There is a lot of inequity in the history of our country, in the history of organizations and in the work that we do, in the systems we work in, and so we just keep chipping away and looking for ways that we can be part of positive change. That's something that I think about pretty much every single day, how we achieve all these other goals related to equity and workload and wellness, and enacting those and making those some guiding markers or goalposts in our partnerships as well.

We have a lot of exciting work happening. Somehow, it feels like we have more work than ever. It's probably because it's true. I'm so amazed by the work that staff are doing and the ways in which we're pushing the field. I'm really looking forward to attending even more of our academies and our conferences and our meetings that we host. I just got back from one yesterday and it was so invigorating, and I just was so proud to see the work that we're doing in the field.

I hope to also continue to participate in my own research and evaluation work as much as I can, although I'm quickly learning that I cannot do it all and I should not do it all. I think the future for PRA is very bright, and one year in, I'm more excited than ever that I get to lead this organization. It's truly an unbelievable group of people, and I know that our partners see that, I know that the awards we get reflect that, but the day-to-day is pretty special too.

Holley Davis:

Thanks so much for those reflections, Sarah. It's been a wonderful first year, and especially during a period of such significant change in our organization's history and our move and the expansion of our areas, it's been really inspiring to hear about the thinking about the work that's happening behind the scenes to make PRA the kind of place that puts people first, so thank you so much for sharing your time and your thoughts today.

I'm Holley Davis and you've been listening to *Conversations on Leadership*. *Conversations on Leadership* is available via Spotify, Stitcher, Apple Podcasts, and SoundCloud. This episode was produced and hosted by Holley Davis and engineered and edited by Elianne Paley. Learn more about us on the *Conversations on Leadership* series at prainc.com.

About

Policy Research Associates, Inc. (PRA) is a Women-Owned Small Business 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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