

PCA HELPS MAKE A TEAM IN WASHINGTON D.C.*

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It started for me on a Monday afternoon in late February of 2001. I was in my Atlanta office, starting to relax after facing the problems that a Monday morning usually brings. It was about 2:00pm when I received a call from our Executive Vice President.

He said, "Tom, we have a problem, and we'd like to know if you will help us." He went on to describe that there were a number of business and human resource problems in one of our company's largest business units (\$180,000,000 of sales) in Washington, D.C. He said that the leader of the business unit would be resigning in a couple of hours. He asked if I would get on an airplane to Washington, in order to be there the next day for an early morning meeting, at which time the current leader would announce his resignation and my taking over as interim leader of the group.

I agreed to the request. My assignment was to be their leader for two or three months and to also do an assessment of the business situation that existed.

I arrived early the next morning at the Washington office, only to find a group of employees had already arrived. They were huddled together and talking in a conference room. I recognized one of the employees who I had known previously within the company. He saw me and broke away from the group to come out and talk. He said, "We heard a rumor you might be coming here. Are you crazy? Do you know what you are getting yourself into?"

The departing leader eventually arrived, made his resignation announcement to the group and then turned things over to me. I had not known, but I quickly learned that some of our corporate human resource people as well as a local University Psychologist had been working with the group for some time, and no significant unifying results had yet occurred. This concerned me. How deep was the problem?

I remember the awkward feeling of sitting there in front of the group along with the General Manager, who was suddenly leaving after being there a number of years. As it relates to PCA, I found that **Unconditional Positive Regard** helped me get through that initial situation in an effective and efficient way. I was thankful and appreciative, in front of the group, toward the departing leader, in regard to the successful years he had spent with the company. I also committed to help him be successful in his new role, which was going to be with one of our dealers. This meant he would still be involved with our company and with the D.C. people, only in a different way.

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Continuing with **UPR**, I then let the group know that I was aware of the accomplishments their business unit had achieved in the past. I let them know that I had high regard for what they had done, and that it was my hope that we could work together in a way that would get them back on that track to being #1 in the company.

My initial observation from that first, brief meeting, was that this was a group of people with talent and energy. However, much of their energy was negatively focused at either the departing leader, the company or each other. Their energy was going in directions that didn't align with the success needed for the company goals. They were not a team.

Helping them become a team became my challenge and gave me the energy to face the many difficulties I knew were ahead. I felt I first needed to be with each person in a way that advanced their individual relationship with me, and then take the next step of helping them build their relationships with each other.

Empathy became the next tool that proved to be both helpful and effective. I let it be known that I quickly wanted to meet with every person who was a part of the business unit, one on one. In preparation for the meetings, their assignment was to be prepared to discuss two issues with me.

- What did they want from their company and job that they were getting?
- What did they want from their company and job that they were not getting?

I spent anywhere from half an hour to an hour with the people in these individual meetings. My role here was mostly **empathic listening**. This turned out to be a win-win rewarding experience. I received valuable information for the business assessment I was responsible for. Individuals also had a chance to be themselves in a way that most of them hadn't experienced before. I began to form the professional, respectful, personal type of relationship I felt I would need in order to be successful in our business goals.

As time went on, one problem that became apparent to me was that the group had become somewhat polarized. A small number of the employees had been supportive of the departing leader and a larger portion was not supportive of the past leadership. The smaller group was known as "Friends of Joe", and they were somewhat ostracized by a number of the employees. Joe was the name of the previous leader.

I think that the **UPR** I began using at the initial meeting helped me get at this problem in at least two ways. My non-judgment of the past leader seemed to relax those who had supported him and freed them up to have more dialog with me than would have otherwise been the case. Those who did not support the past leader also welcomed the non-judgment. They liked what they referred to as "the calm" that non-judgment type behavior brought, that being listened to brought, as opposed to the chaos, conflict and confrontation they had been used to for some time.

As it relates to the business problems, the people there had much more experience in the local market than I did. **Empathy** to the rescue again. All I had to do was to listen to them and the solutions to problems were eventually forthcoming. What once was a number of people who were mostly at odds with either their past leader, their company or with each other, were now

becoming more of a team. It appeared to me that they got to a point where they could start going after their individual goals as well as help each other in a more free, respectful and mutually supportive way.

To make a long story short, I stayed with this group for about three months, which was the time it took the company to find a new leader for the area. Although the weekly commuting between Atlanta and Washington DC was difficult, the experience turned out to be very rewarding for me.

For those three months, I felt I was able to be myself, and was also able let others be themselves, in a way that directed energy toward achieving business results. It continues to be amazing to me, how much this simple formula works. It is so heartening to me when I see people tap un-used potential to take on additional responsibility, and then watch the joy they have in doing it.

For me as a worker, and as I reflect back on this and other similar experiences, I realize that I personally enjoy the challenge of these type of problem situations and the satisfaction that progress against them brings. I also have found that once the problems are solved and routine begins to set in, that I get bored and it's time for me to go on and solve another problem.

Some of the people I worked with in Washington DC referred to me as the "Corporate Troubleshooter". They told me they thought that I must have a lot of courage to willingly jump into a situation like they had. Although courage might be true to a small extent, I think what is more true is that the better skilled one is in ways of being, like PCA, that less amounts of courage are actually needed. I continue to grow at handling these types of problems, because of what I experience and learn when the skills/conditions of PCA are employed, especially when they are aligned with a participative philosophy of management.

If I analyzed the amount of time spent with each skill/condition, I believe it would be:

10% Congruence --- Setting expectations

80% Empathy --- Mostly active listening

10% Unconditional Positive Regard --- Wanting the best for the people involved.