

## **LIFE AFTER PR, HERE IS THE FIRST IN A SERIES OF ARTICLES PROFILING SUCCESSFUL EXECs WHO REACHED THE END OF THEIR CAREER TRACKS IN COMMS AND FOUND NEW PATHS.**

The pace of change today in PR and Comms has accelerated and the content of the work has undergone profound changes. In the midst of these challenges, executives have built successful careers as heads of consulting firms and leaders of corporate communications functions. The talents that have been required are vision, leadership and strategic thinking.

Younger than their predecessors in achieving their success, there is time and energy for these senior managers to forge new career paths. The talents that they thought fit one track are applicable in surprising (to them) new directions. Here is the story of "Greg" and the decisions he made that led to an outcome he never could have anticipated.

### **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

1. WHAT IS THE BACKGROUND OF AN "A" TEAM COMMS EXECUTIVE WHO LEFT A GLOBAL AGENCY TO FIND A NEW CAREER AND NEW DIRECTION IN HIS LIFE?	2
2. HOW WAS GREG'S CAREER SHAPED BY JOINING A GLOBAL PR CONSULTING GROUP THAT COULD OFFER SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES?	2
3. HOW DID THE PROMOTION GREG WAS OFFERED LEAD TO THE END OF HIS SUCCESSFUL CAREER AT THE CONSULTING FIRM?	3
4. WHAT RISKS EXIST IN MAKING A MAJOR TRANSITION IN FINDING A NEW CAREER AND HOW DID "GREG" MANAGE THESE RISKS?	4
5. HOW DID THE NEW CAREER PATH FOR GREG TAKE A MAJOR, UNEXPECTED TURN?	4
6. DID THE GAMBLE THAT GREG TOOK SUCCEED? WHAT ARE HIS OBSERVATIONS ABOUT HIS CAREER AND THE ISSUE OF LEADERSHIP?	5
7. WHAT ADVICE, BASED ON HIS EXPERIENCE, CAN GREG SHARE ABOUT TAKING ON THE RISK INVOLVED IN CARVING OUT A NEW CAREER PATH?	6

### **About the Author**

Judith Cushman is President of Judith Cushman & Associates. The firm offers consulting and retained search services specializing in communications and related assignments. based in Bellevue, WA. She has a track record of 100% success over the past 18+ years, as a boutique, completing every contract awarded the firm. Ms. Cushman has more than 30-years total experience focusing on Vice President and Senior Director searches. Prior to forming her own business in Seattle, she was associated with a pioneering search firm in NYC that was the first to specialize exclusively in communications searches.



Please forward questions or comments. To subscribe to the blog, send an email with SUBSCRIBE in the subject line to: [jcushman@jc-a.com](mailto:jcushman@jc-a.com).

## **WHAT IS THE BACKGROUND OF AN "A" TEAM COMMS EXECUTIVE WHO LEFT A GLOBAL AGENCY TO FIND A NEW CAREER AND NEW DIRECTION IN HIS LIFE?**

Here is the profile of "Greg". Until 5-years ago he was on a classic track to assume the leadership of a global PR Consulting Group when he made the decision to leave. He knew that was not the right job for him. Instead he conceived of a new business model serving a niche market that he instinctively and viscerally understood. This would completely upend his life. Fortunately, his family supported him. His decision led to new work options and a role today that he could never have imagined.

Here is the story of Greg's early life and experience.

Greg was raised on a small family farm in the Western US. He recalls his life with nostalgia and fondness. What he learned from that life would be foundational for the values he applied throughout his career. Successful farming is about working cooperatively, individual contributions, valuing hard work, and respecting people in the community. It is about being "down to earth", practical and honest, since neighbors depend on neighbors in a crisis.

It was clear that Greg was intellectually gifted; his goals were ambitious and far-reaching. He matriculated at a university on the East coast with an outstanding reputation for international educational programs. He received a BS in Foreign Service in the mid 90ties and then spent a year abroad in Asia. He returned to the US and connected with a consulting firm specializing in public affairs in DC.

After less than 2-years and a decision not to pursue a career in Foreign Service, he made what would become his most significant career move. He joined a top tier global agency in a relatively junior role but with enormous potential to move in any direction he felt he would like to explore. It was now 1996.

<http://www.jc-a.com/life-after-pr-series-greg-part-1-what-is-the-background-of-an-a-team-comms-executive-who-left-a-global-agency-to-find-a-new-career-and-new-dire/>

## **HOW WAS GREG'S CAREER SHAPED BY JOINING A GLOBAL PR CONSULTING GROUP THAT COULD OFFER SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES?**

It was 1996 and Greg had just joined a global agency that would shape his PR career. While the agency was large and it would be difficult to stand out, Greg's ability to see opportunities for the agency to grow and take advantage of developing trends was recognized. His persuasive talent to make the "business" case for new services at the firm, implement a profitable structure to deliver those services and win client approval to implement these services, became evident. He had the talent and leadership ability to do it all.

He developed a Client Leadership Program (for excellence in delivering client service), a story-telling curriculum, and a media intelligence service (which predated the explosion into social media services).



He held the title of Client Relationship Manager until he was offered the role as Executive VP and GM of an office in the West.

With the leadership team based in Northeast running the global organization, there was a degree of trust that Greg had earned. He was allowed to manage the office without strict oversight. He was left to transform a regional office into an organization that incorporated his values and leadership philosophy. In less than 3-years he doubled the size of the office while being named one of the best places to work in the state.

With his reputation growing, he was seen as a potential future leader of the organization. He was offered a promotion that would clearly put him in the spotlight with a new role based at headquarters. This moment was very challenging and difficult because of the risks involved in either committing to a new direction or not. If he did not accept, would he have reached the end of his career path with the firm?

<http://www.jc-a.com/life-after-pr-series-greg-part-2-how-was-gregs-career-shaped-by-joining-a-global-pr-consulting-group-that-could-offer-significant-challenges/>

### **HOW DID THE PROMOTION GREG WAS OFFERED LEAD TO THE END OF HIS SUCCESSFUL CAREER AT THE CONSULTING FIRM?**

The promotion to a new role based at the headquarters of the firm, meant committing to a leadership track and paying a high personal price. Relocation would be a major family issue.

Also, Greg had been given a great deal of managerial freedom to increase client billings and to create a highly profitable, productive and stable office. His success was about leading a group and fostering a culture of teamwork and wins. The next move he was offered fundamentally changed the nature of his work.

Greg was asked to take on a global role as head of the technology practice. He would essentially become a world-wide traveler to spearhead new business presentations and be "on call" to contribute to current client situations. He would not oversee an office and would need to move to New York City to work at company headquarters. He would be expected to be a team player reporting to the senior leaders of the firm.

Greg accepted the promotion and moved his family. It took about a year for Greg to realize that he was not happy with this role. In essence he discovered that he was not a candidate to run an organization that took him away from direct leadership of teams and clients. This discovery was a direct connection with the early values that shaped him. He also reaffirmed how important his family was and how this move was taking too high a toll on their lives.

He understood that "the fix" was not a matter of moving to another agency where he might be more successful. He recognized that he needed to make a major change and decide what he really wanted to do and how he could be sure his family would be happy with his decision. With all the success he had had, it took enormous courage to essentially give up a 17+ year investment.

<http://www.jc-a.com/life-after-pr-series-greg-part-3-how-did-the-promotion-greg-was-offered-lead-to-the-end-of-his-successful-career-at-the-consulting-firm/>

## **WHAT RISKS EXIST IN MAKING A MAJOR TRANSITION IN FINDING A NEW CAREER AND HOW DID "GREG" MANAGE THESE RISKS?**

With his track record, Greg had enough confidence in his ability to innovate and develop a new business model. If at this point, he had been thinking only along traditional career lines, Greg would have been extremely limited in finding a job that he knew fit his entrepreneurial talents. He had already realized a senior agency role was not a fit and he was not qualified for a top corporate position (which had drawbacks in any case.) Here is where I see the values that shaped Greg and his ability to work at the ground level with clients, coming into alignment.

He launched his own company offering consulting services and created a product for a niche market reflective of his rural experience. It is about location-based marketing. It is founded on the belief that an investment in presence (seeing/being at a location) led by storytelling, results in informed visitor/customer decision-making. From that premise, he created messaging and software to support chambers of commerce efforts (with limited budgets) that encourage visitors to explore local regions. Greg could personally present the idea to clients by attending local chamber meetings/conferences and arranging demonstrations.

Greg pursued this concept, while continuing to accept consulting projects that brought him income. He also launched his company. It took several years to become successful. Meanwhile, he was able to experiment with lifestyles that fit his family. At one point he lived on an island with a small town but ultimately found that was too difficult to travel for business. Next he selected a small city that was several hours away from his client base and purchased a home. He could then commute to clients or find temporary quarters for short stays. That adjustment seemed to fit their needs, but it did take two tries to find the best solution.

<http://www.jc-a.com/life-after-pr-series-greg-part-4-what-risks-exist-in-making-a-major-transition-in-finding-a-new-career-and-how-did-greg-manage-these-risks/>

## **HOW DID THE NEW CAREER PATH FOR GREG TAKE A MAJOR, UNEXPECTED TURN?**

Just when Greg thought he had found the ideal balance and his company was producing revenue, one of his consulting clients came to him with an offer he could not refuse.

Greg had a particularly close relationship with a client that began in 2002 when he purchased a custom-made product from the company. Greg thought the workmanship and quality were excellent, so it was a real pleasure to help market the company.

That is how Greg came to know the owner. It was a complete surprise to Greg when he received a proposal to have him join the company as head of marketing on track to assume leadership of the corporation.

The offer was in recognition of Greg's talents as a leader and business executive. There were issues the company had to resolve in order to grow. The current founder/owner felt that Greg would have the vision to take the organization through a period of expansion while retaining its core values. It was those values that led to the company's success.

I do not believe that Greg thought he had the potential to run a multi-million-dollar company, but the CEO recognized how Greg's values and talents were an excellent match to do just that.

From Greg's standpoint and for anyone considering a non-traditional situation, what are the very real risks involved in accepting an offer? In Greg's case, being promised a role when the leader plans on leaving, is based on trust (not locked into a contract.) Will the leader actually be able to relinquish the reins? Or, how much decision-making will be delegated? In some cases, an offer is made in good faith and then the reality is that the founder/owner just can't let go. Also, Greg had already created a viable business, how would he keep that running?

<http://www.jc-a.com/life-after-pr-series-greg-part-5-how-did-the-new-career-path-for-greg-take-a-major-unexpected-turn/>

### **DID THE GAMBLE THAT GREG TOOK SUCCEED? WHAT ARE HIS OBSERVATIONS ABOUT HIS CAREER AND THE ISSUE OF LEADERSHIP?**

Fortunately, when Greg was offered an opportunity to join a company and discontinue day to day work on his own business, he found a solution. He minimized risk by appointing an executive capable of developing his consulting business. Greg still remains the owner and can monitor day to day performance.

Once he began his new role at the company, he outlined a series of steps that started with small consulting assignments to see if the relationship had the potential to mature into a full-time situation. Greg provided an update, and everything is working out well. None of our concerns materialized.

The plan is that he will transition into the CEO role. He has assumed responsibility for production and logistics in addition to business development, sales and marketing. The company is growing, and he travels between offices and works remotely from home generally 2-days a week. He is now hiring a VP of Marketing which means his role is about strategy, leadership and management of the organization.

Here are some of his thoughts about his career and the issue of leadership.

Most importantly, "There is life after communications."

"You go up the ranks in an organization and end up after 20-years in a leadership post; leadership skills are most transferable. You just happen to work in PR. That shift in your thinking is fundamental."

"Some communicators are born leaders; they know how to take a group and focus them and be innovative. They know how to hunker down in bad times and keep the team inspired. They also know how to scale the organization during a period of growth."

<http://www.jc-a.com/life-after-pr-series-greg-part-6-did-the-gamble-that-greg-took-succeed-what-are-his-observations-about-his-career-and-the-issue-of-leadership/>

## **WHAT ADVICE, BASED ON HIS EXPERIENCE, CAN GREG SHARE ABOUT TAKING ON THE RISK INVOLVED IN CARVING OUT A NEW CAREER PATH?**

Over the course of several years, Greg was able to clearly examine his career options at significant turning points. The first was a major career move in communications and a promotion that involved relocating.

The lifestyle change was not a fit, nor was the nature of the work. Once it became clear that was the situation, Greg had sufficient support from family and confidence in his ability to develop a business plan and execute it. That led to his next major lifestyle change.

His most recent shift has been to take over management of a company he knows well and respects. He is on track to become its President.

Here are his observations and lessons learned. Based on Greg's experience, he continues to emphasize leadership skills. He says they are the key as you move into senior roles. A PR background is incidental which means a major refocus about what is important to you and your career.

- "People gravitate to leaders
- "My top priority is to give my people the skills to grow as leaders.
- "My next priority is to build a cohesive senior leadership team and help them feel ownership of the results
- "There are different ways to lead; you can engage a group to focus on a direction.
- "When I was building my company, I found partners to take my lead, and to adopt my vision. I convinced them and showed them. That's a form of leadership as well. I worked with a group of Executive Directors; I solved their problems on their terms.
- "We (in PR) short-change ourselves. When I say I do PR, that's too narrow; We can do more. When I was working with a client, a CEO, he said "Here are my needs. Can you do this for me?" He didn't see me as only doing PR. He saw me as a partner helping him and that was what was important."

<http://www.jc-a.com/life-after-pr-series-greg-part-7-what-advice-based-on-his-experience-can-greg-share-about-taking-on-the-risk-involved-in-carving-out-a-new-career-path/>