



**LIFE AFTER PR: Vicky’s Story—Here’s how she followed her own instincts (not a plan with long term objectives) to be in the best position to achieve career success while balancing it with her home life. To think about this further, in retrospect, she earned each promotion by succeeding in every job she took and being recognized for her accomplishments.**

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## **HOW DID VICKY'S BACKGROUND AND EARLY CAREER CONTRIBUTE TO HER FLEXIBILITY IN MAKING CAREER DECISIONS?**

Vicky began her career in the Western US, living in a booming high-tech community. She was educated there and graduated with a broad background in marketing and communications. Her major was in advertising and as she describes it, she "happened into PR". This was during the heyday of marketing and product PR, press releases, trade shows, B2B PR and Publicity. Lines were blurred between the tools and methods to support sales. The pace was frantic, intense and direct. Start-ups were popping up all over, either flourishing or burning out quickly.

One of her first jobs was with a PR tech agency. It was founded by a visionary owner, a woman who changed workplace practices to accommodate the needs of working mothers and families. The firm was growing rapidly and Vicky, a promising, talented, hard-working professional could take on as much responsibility as she could handle. She had an instinct for connecting with clients, quickly earning their trust, with the strategic ability to see the big picture and help them with their issues. Promotions came quickly. The agency was established in the late 80ties and later sold to a top tier global PR firm in 2002.

Vicky jumped in to "do it all." She did not see herself as a PR professional but rather as a Marketing professional and gave little thought about her ability to do whatever had to be done. It seemed quite natural that she could write proposals, create a full range of promotional materials (including financial), manage accounts, develop staff as well as "pitch" new business. She quickly took on the role of Office General Manager. Also, during this early phase of her professional career, she began to display a natural talent to support and mentor her staff.

Unlike many professionals who are excellent in a specific discipline, she could do everything that was demanded of her. Her talent as a "generalist" was something she did so naturally that she underestimated how useful that could be to building her career. Also, unlike many professionals that started out in agencies and expected to stay for one or two years before jumping to another firm and maximizing their earnings, Vicky's values were different.

She understood the advantage of staying in one place for a reasonable amount of time. She thought if she were happy where she was, and remained interested in the work, with the ability to both grow business and be involved in client strategy, she could make the most of the situation. There would be no reason to move just to increase earnings alone. Throughout her career, she has valued stability over short term gain.

<http://www.jc-a.com/life-after-pr-series-vicky-part-1-how-did-vickys-background-and-early-career-contribute-to-her-flexibility-in-making-career-decisions/>

## **HOW DID VICKY'S CORPORATE EXPERIENCE, STARTING FROM THE GROUND UP AND MANAGING A RELOCATION WITHIN THE COMPANY, BUILD HER SKILL-SET FOR FUTURE POSITIONS?**

Vicky was prominent in the community and it was no surprise, given her track record at the agency, that she would be regularly approached to consider job opportunities. She was offered a corporate position with a major technology company in trouble. While many would see the role as too risky, Vicky saw potential and accepted the job.

It was a wonderful chance to transition to an environment where her accomplishments could be clearly recognized for what she had been able to achieve as head of the communications group. There was no place to go but up. Failure was not an option in her mind. She said, "When I started, the media thought they (the company) had gone out of business and look at them now." The corporation today is a global leader providing data storage solutions employing over 72,000 people.

She remained with the company for about 8 years and during that time for family reasons, relocated to another state. The company was convinced that she could manage the department and continued to employ her as a full-time remote employee. Her talent for building a cohesive team was a key reason for the vote of confidence. That arrangement continued until 2000. Vicky said, "I am still friendly with most of them."

The relocation was due to an opportunity for her spouse to take ownership of a consumer healthcare business in the new community. While Vicky was not employed by the business, she contributed to its growth and learned a great deal about marketing and customer satisfaction in a highly competitive environment. That provided her with real-world insight about what it takes to make a sale. She gained a visceral, instinctive, practical understanding of a mindset that was professionally invaluable in her work.

<http://www.jc-a.com/life-after-pr-series-vicky-part-2-how-did-vickys-corporate-experience-starting-from-the-ground-up-and-managing-a-relocation-within-the-company-build-h/>

## **HOW DID VICKY RESPOND TO THE CHALLENGE OF BRINGING IN NEW ACCOUNTS AS SHE BEGAN A NEW ROLE AS VICE PRESIDENT FOR A GLOBAL PR FIRM?**

Ready for a major challenge, she had 8-years with her corporate employer and 5 were remote. Vicky was recruited to team up with a General Manager of a global Public Relations firm where she now lived. The GM had a reputation as a charismatic leader with values that were compatible with hers. Vicky's initial title was Vice President. The office had a history of supporting one major client that accounted for its success. When that relationship changed, the agency began a major initiative to win new accounts. The role was appealing due to that challenge, the support of the GM and the latitude to do what she thought was best.

Vicky was responsible for bringing in the first consumer product accounts. She also developed an approach to source high quality technology accounts and more effectively present proposals. In one year, she participated in adding 17 accounts/projects to the roster. She said it was fun to bring in new business and learn about new companies. "I always liked small to mid-sized companies. I could go either way though (to very major organizations). I would always do my best and would rarely decline to work on an account, but instead I would try to determine the best team for a specific business," she commented.

Vicky built relationships and mentored junior level professionals (roughly at the Senior Account level) which led to reducing turnover by 30%. She was innately drawn to that role and set an example at the agency. She said, "Mentoring is not valued as it should be in an agency. What happens at agencies is they burn people out at the A/E, Sr. A/E and Supervisor level. The junior staff become unhappy, feel unappreciated and search for another credential for their resume that offers a different workplace culture. A corporate job looks good by comparison."

"I made it a point to connect with the younger staff. I'm approachable. They can ask me anything. If you think, as a supervisor that there is no time to answer questions, that is wrong. Answer a question first so the work comes out right and it does not have to be done twice. The effort is correct from the beginning and the employee is happier. Many people recognized what I was doing (although it sometimes took them a while to see how important it was)."

<http://www.jc-a.com/life-after-pr-series-vicky-part-3-how-did-vicky-respond-to-the-challenge-of-bringing-in-new-accounts-as-she-began-a-new-role-as-vice-president-for-a-global-pr-fi/>

## **WHAT WERE VICKY'S INNATE TALENTS THAT HELPED HER SUCCEED?**

Vicky was not interested in the spotlight for herself. She was motivated more by helping others succeed. Mentoring was a natural way to share her insights and assist up-and-coming professionals mature and perform more effectively. She was an empathetic listener. Her values were transparent and that built trust. She was sincere about her interest in others and let her team know that they could reach out to her when they needed to — not only when it was convenient or in a formal review session.

She described one of her talents when we began our first conversation. She had an ability to understand the politics and viewpoint of each participant in a meeting. She grasped what each executive hoped to gain and how to bring the meeting to a successful conclusion — for each player. Attendees felt satisfied with the outcome and that they were heard. That was one of the lessons she shared as she mentored her staff.

She prepared her team in advance for important meetings by asking questions about the politics and anticipated outcomes. She insisted they had a sense of what to expect and how to keep a meeting on track. She invested in this effort so that her team would become sufficiently experienced to ultimately gain the savvy and skill to assume senior leadership roles.

Her clarity of observation was due in part to the fact that she herself had no real political agenda. She was an objective observer of the jockeying that could be expected.

She described one of her fundamental principles, "Play Well with Others" that meant always expect to be on your best behavior under all circumstances — from having an informal conversation, attending or leading a meeting and to being flexible about adjusting as circumstances change.

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## **HOW DID VICKY'S ROLE AS VICE PRESIDENT FOR A GLOBAL PR AGENCY CONTRIBUTE TO ITS GROWTH?**

When Vicky joined the agency, it had recently suffered the loss of a major client. The challenge was to stabilize the office, win sufficient business to replace what was lost, and compete for talent. Despite top tier global credentials, the firm was scrambling to establish a reputation for both excellent work and as a great place to build a career. During her first few years, the momentum grew and the



firm met its goals. Vicky said new clients came from all sectors. The teams had to be flexible, creative and focused on getting the work done. This was not an easy task.

Despite the pressure, under the leadership of the GM, the culture was positive and supportive. Vicky could set her own schedule and was never micro-managed. It was a great place to work with frequent small perks that indicated the leadership wanted the office to be a “fun” place. There were a variety of in-house events that fostered that culture, along with the professional development opportunities that Vicky was involved in.

The office prospered, becoming one of the most successful in the entire nationwide network. It was an impressive achievement. Considering the market potential of this office, compared with the much greater potential of larger marketplaces throughout the US, there was great interest from senior executives at headquarters about how this was achieved. In particular, the focus was on the team that was responsible for the success that outshone the logical top picks.

A decision was made to promote the local GM to a new role which represented a step up in preparation for an international leadership post. A Senior VP with excellent operational experience and a direct report to the GM, but not a charismatic leader, was promoted to the GM role.

From Vicky’s perspective, that was not a role she coveted. The reason for her stability at the agency varied over the years. As she raised a family her flexible schedule allowed her to do that comfortably. Later, there were other reasons as she developed new ways to continue to mentor staff, as an example. She always enjoyed the client relations and new business aspects of the work.

Ultimately, she had a job she shaped, was appreciated for what she had accomplished, and reported to an excellent GM. But a change in leadership came with a change in culture. Gradually, the office became less supportive of her efforts, more structured, turnover increased while client wins declined. She did not find it to be a fun place to work anymore.

<http://www.jc-a.com/life-after-pr-series-vicky-part-5-how-did-vickys-role-as-vice-president-for-a-global-pr-agency-contribute-to-its-growth/>

**AFTER RISING TO AN EVP ROLE IN A TOP-TIER PR AGENCY, WITH A GREAT DEAL OF LATITUDE TO SUCCEED ON HER OWN TERMS, WHAT HAPPENED TO DISTURB MORE THAN 10-YEARS OF STABILITY? HOW DID A CHANGE IN LEADERSHIP AND THE COMPANY’S PRIORITIES MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**

After more than a decade at the firm, the leadership changed and along with that was a shift in values—away from the original ones that Vicky had embraced. It became clear the culture had changed to a more intense focus on bringing in new clients and asking senior executives to handle larger account loads. Inevitably there was less time to build in-depth relationships. Also, there was less focus on employee retention which was troubling and ran counter to her values. Vicky took time to evaluate the situation and quietly began to let key associates know she wanted to make a change.

Vicky has always been a communications generalist even though she ostensibly was in a PR role. She used all the tools and techniques she knew to solve business problems. She was practical, down-to-earth and saw herself as a communications consultant. She said that working with start-up companies early in her career was a great training ground for learning how to “do it all.” Despite her rise to EVP,

she was not hung up by her title and simply focused on meeting clients' needs. Given her success, no one attempted to change her client-centric work.

As companies grew and roles became narrower (in the 1990ties), position descriptions distinguished between PR, Advertising, Marketing, and Marketing Communications jobs, but the content of Vicky's work remained broad. Her more recent agency experience was with a Public Relations firm; however, she continued to see herself as a problem solver using whatever tools were right for the situation (and she knew how to use them well).

In particular, she found a hallmark of her work was in storytelling. Despite the technical nature of some of the products she represented, she found that was a powerful way to explain the problem that the product solved—or the solution it offered.

With the advent of Social Media, the firm she joined has re-positioned itself as solutions-based with a wide variety of tools and areas of expertise. It seems the market has come full circle and caught up with an approach that is the way Vicky has always operated.

After many months under new leadership and increasing signals about the culture shift, it became an unavoidable conclusion that she needed to leave. Always a professional, she continued to perform at a high level, although she was no longer feeling fulfilled or rewarded. That was a difficult period for Vicky because her career had always been about tackling challenges and succeeding based on a shared vision with her employer. She had always felt recognized and rewarded for her accomplishments. It couldn't be clearer that she was now in an organization where she was the outlier.

It became a struggle to do excellent work that was not valued. Finally, it reached a point where the price of staying under trying circumstances was too high and she felt her values were being compromised. She simply was not able to do the work she felt the client needed because of her workload and lack of adequate staffing.

<http://www.jc-a.com/life-after-pr-series-vicky-part-6-after-rising-to-an-evp-role-in-a-top-tier-pr-agency-with-a-great-deal-of-latitude-to-succeed-on-her-own-terms-what-happened-t/>

### **WHAT WAS VICKY'S PLAN FOR CUTTING TIES, LEAVING THE AGENCY, AND CHOOSING HER NEXT POSITION? DID SHE HAVE A STRATEGY FOR THE LONG- TERM?**

We have seen how Vicky, throughout her career, has made risky decisions without doubting her ability to handle the challenges that can and do arise. Another hallmark of her career has been building relationships that extend beyond the workplace. She was able to reach out to her many, many contacts and let them know she was interested in consulting assignments. She was always professional and careful to avoid any conflicts with her former employer.

Unlike the other executives I profiled, Vicky was not ready to fully transition out of a communications role. However, she wanted an opportunity to be in charge and use all her skills to meet the business goals of the organization she would join. After more than a decade with an agency, she wanted to have a discernable impact on an organization — that embraced her values. I think her attitude was, "I'll know it (the company/culture fit) when I see it." (I don't recommend this strategy for most professionals.)



What would make sense for Vicky's next move? Even though she hadn't outlined more than an initial approach to job-hunting, she deeply trusted her strategic abilities and instincts. She had reached a very senior level in her career following this path and knew how critical the right corporate culture had to be. She was not looking at a plan for the long term. Her focus was on, "What is next?"

What else mattered? She wanted to be the decision maker for the staff she supervised. She enjoyed consulting with smaller organizations because she could be a member of the leadership team of the organization. She wanted to make a difference in an organization with growth potential. She saw a need to integrate all communications initiatives and her background would allow her to orchestrate a cohesive messaging strategy.

It was also during this transition that the family moved to another state and a smaller community with limited senior corporate roles. One of the challenges would be to work remotely from their new location, if the post were based elsewhere.

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## **WHAT WAS THE INTERIM SOLUTION THAT VICKY FOUND IN HER JOB SEARCH AND COULD THAT BECOME PERMANENT?**

Almost immediately after leaving a fulltime post, Vicky reached out to two organizations that knew her and her work. She was awarded free-lance contracts with both almost immediately. One of those contracts turned into a long-term permanent opportunity. A narrowly specialized, IP, global tech company had a vacant PR manager position to fill. Instead of filling it, they contracted with Vicky to build the function and gain visibility for the organization.

Within 6-months the tech company realized how effective she was, across all channels, to accomplish their strategic business goals. She was offered an in-house role as Vice President of Communications based on her performance. She had demonstrated by her personal success that the tactical PR Manager job should be upgraded. Vicky described accepting the offer as a "no risk" decision since she had been working for them already. The company is right-sized for her, narrowly focused and does not have the scope to grow exponentially. Of course, one can never say never. It may be acquired (as a result of her good work) and that may change the equation.

The fact that the company does business in over 95 countries means that Vicky's location is irrelevant. The job is virtual and requires occasional meetings at company headquarters and some global travel. She has a team of employees and outside vendors. This arrangement has been in place for over 3-years and during that time, a comprehensive program has been implemented. Despite the virus and stay at home orders, there has been no impact on her work. Meanwhile, here are examples of her efforts:

- Social Media to connect with customers, employees, the sales team
- Thought Leadership: articles (to enhance brand awareness), surveys, presentations (subject matter experts)
- Presentations by key executives enhancing their reputation as industry leaders and contracts with leaders of speaker bureaus.

Vicky is enjoying this new phase of her corporate communications career. Essentially, she created her job as a communications strategist. She is making full use of all her years of marketing and communications experience in this decision-making role. She now has several staffers reporting to her remotely, reflecting a trend which is not uncommon as teams are hired and geographically dispersed. One of the outcomes of the pandemic is a trend toward working remotely. It seems Vicky is just ahead of the curve.

<http://www.jc-a.com/life-after-pr-series-vicky-part-8-what-was-the-interim-solution-that-vicky-found-in-her-job-search-and-could-that-become-permanent/>

## **WHAT MIGHT THE FUTURE HOLD FOR VICKY?**

Given her location, it will be rare to find another even more challenging opportunity in the corporate world. This role may continue to be engaging for several years. However, in my opinion, there is a limit to what can be exciting about the company story. (That is the tradeoff when you represent a company in a niche market versus a diversified multi-divisional corporation.)

It may be possible for Vicky to transition into a pure management role in the organization. I see that as a long shot. It will be more likely that she can change her relationship to a consulting role with the company as her only client. She would assist the leadership team as they hire a Director (not a VP) to lead the team. That arrangement would guarantee Vicky an income and allow her the freedom to follow a new path.

For example, she might devote her energies to causes she supports. She may leave the corporate world behind. Given her focus on mentoring and coaching, she may create a business to assist young professionals to perform at their best. Perhaps she may decide to work less and pursue personal interests.

Since it was easy for her to find consulting work, taking on several retainer clients may be the direction Vicky takes in the future. Due to the Coronavirus, working virtually is becoming a new "norm" and much more acceptable. That may open up new opportunities for senior executives.

A successful leader may say, "I'm done with being at the top." He (or she) may add, "I'm setting off on my own and I don't know where I'm going but it will be fun finding out." — Vicky's example and that attitude encourages me to think it is a perfectly valid approach to take.

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