

*"Anna Conrad is an articulate expert who serves as a great resource for executive business-management topics."*

**The Business Journals**

# **(R)EVOLUTION**

One Man's Leadership Journey



# **ANNA CONRAD**

## CHAPTER

# 1

I was sitting at a small round table in my manager's office, smiling as I finished reporting that for the seventh straight month, my team and I had exceeded all of our goals. I leaned back confidently in the chair, my right leg crossed over my left knee, waiting for praise about my team's performance.

Robert had hired me a little over a year ago, and I looked forward to our meetings. I liked his no-nonsense approach, and I appreciated that he listened to me. He asked for my opinion often, and when he didn't act on a suggestion, he let me know why.

Robert's gray eyes locked on mine. I interpreted his accompanying nod as appreciation for the hard work we have done. As the silence grew, I noticed a frown appear on his face, and I felt a twinge of doubt.

"Is there something wrong?" I asked, uncertainty edging into my voice.

Robert said, "Tom, making your numbers is only *part* of what's important. To be honest, I'm a little worried about how you are making those numbers. I told you when we hired you, we look at success from a people-perspective as much as a process-perspective."

I stared at him blankly. I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Think about it like this," Robert said, leaning forward, his voice becoming stronger, "we know you're great at hitting all your numbers. Your team is one of the few that exceeded every goal that was set for you this year. The goals we haven't talked about, and the ones that are important as you progress in a leadership role at this company, are the ones that show us how these goals are met," Robert explained, drawing out the word *how* to emphasize it.

Tilting my head slightly, I felt my eyebrows furrow in confusion. I shifted my weight in my chair, fidgeting as I waited for him to continue. I folded my hands in my lap and took two deep breaths to calm the nervous feelings.

Robert rose from his chair and began to pace, looking out the window and then back at me sitting there, watching him intently.

"You have exceeded our business targets," he continued, "but did you know the six people who opted to leave our company this past year cost us over \$175,000? We had to train their replacements and pay overtime to employees to cover the work until the new hires got up to speed."

"I know that," I said, feeling defensive. "But the first three needed to leave; they were bad for the team. They didn't like the changes I was making, and they refused to use the new processes. I gave them plenty of warning. They decided to leave instead of getting on board. We're doing much better without them."

Robert looked away, and then with his typical guttural response, said, "Uh-huh."

"As for the other three," I continued definitively, "Susan went on maternity leave and never came back. Juan got a job at a startup. And Missy transferred to another department. I can't help it if they didn't agree with the changes I made or if they found a better opportunity."

"You may be right," he said, "but there is a saying my old mentor used to tell me about leadership, 'People don't leave companies. They leave managers.'"

I winced. Ouch.

Robert continued, his voice getting stronger, "Your numbers show you are doing fine without those six employees, from an operation's perspective. However, a few things were mentioned during their exit interviews about your management style that causes me concern. I have also received information from others on teams you have been on about your aggressive style. Truthfully, Tom, I'm more than a little concerned that you are putting the business before the people."

"Of course, I am," I interrupted, my voice rising in confusion. "You brought me in to shake things up, to change them. I'm doing that, and it's obviously working. Look at the changes I've made to improve processes and raise profits for the division! The three processes we streamlined alone in our last implementation phase cut errors by 10 percent and decreased production time substantially."

I felt myself getting angry and more defensive.

"We should talk about the feedback I've received about you," Robert said as he stood at the edge of the table and peered down at me.

I cringed at his use of the word *feedback*. It was a definite red flag that something bad was coming my way. It was the same feeling I used to get when I was in grade school and got called to the principal's office.

I settled back into my seat, and tried to calm myself. Waiting is always the hardest part.

Robert sat down in the chair across from me and said, "I've been told by several of your direct reports, colleagues, and even a few folks in other departments that you are hard to work with. The word 'bully' was used more than once."

Although shocked, I didn't respond, and I didn't want to maintain eye contact. But I knew I had to appear as attentive and open as I could. I took a breath, stared at his face and waited.

Robert didn't miss a beat, and said, "You might be not be aware of this, but a few members of your staff have recently come to me requesting a transfer to another department. That might not sound unusual to you, but in fact, the troubling piece about all this is the other department heads have rejected their requests for a transfer."

He gracefully pulled out the chair next to me and sat down.

Looking squarely at him, I said, "I'm glad they refused the request, but why would they do that? My people are great."

In my selfish thoughts, I was relieved but perplexed at the narrow-mindedness of the other managers.

Robert, speaking slowly, as if to emphasize the importance of his words, said, "They were afraid you would retaliate on several joint projects if they hired one of your team members."

Me, retaliate? That's a stretch, I thought to myself. How could people think that about me? I have never threatened anyone. I know I need to work on having more patience, but it is hard not to get frustrated when people are lazy and don't even try. I looked at Robert, and waited for what he would say next. I didn't dare say anything right now.

"I'll be blunt," Robert said looking me straight in the eyes, "if things don't change, we are going to have to let you go."

"What?" I said loudly, shocked at his statement. "I've exceeded all my numbers. Hell, I saved the company almost half a million dollars with the processes we put in place on the STAR project alone."

I paused and took a deep breath.

"Isn't that why you brought me here?" I asked. "Wasn't the goal to make changes? If I remember correctly, making friends is not and was not part of the job description."

"To be fair, yes, that was the expectation," Robert said in a quiet voice. "But, I know this about the company and our employees; right now, as long as your name is associated with some of those changes, people will not follow through."

I started to interrupt, but he held up his right hand to stop me from speaking.

"Yes, people will follow the procedures when you're standing over them, but I promise, the moment you move on to the next project, those processes you and your team worked so hard to develop and put into place will be tossed aside. People will do the new processes only as long as they think you are watching them."

"So, you're saying people would sabotage the project just to make me look bad?" I asked angrily.

"It may seem like sabotage," Robert replied evenly, "but that isn't their intention. They need to believe in the project and the changes you're trying to make. That begins when they can believe in you."

I was torn between feeling angry and feeling hurt. Both emotions were strong inside me, and I didn't know if I was going to respond with a yell, a sob, or a whisper.

"I have proven I know what I'm talking about," I stammered and then went on in a more confident, stronger tone. "That's what's important. I know what I'm doing, and what I'm doing is the right thing for the business."

"Yes, but in order for people to want to follow you and listen to you, they need to know you care about them. This doesn't mean you have to be everyone's best friend and give them a hug every day," he said with a smile and a slight twinkle in his eye. "But it does mean each person needs to feel respected as a person and not just as an employee."

I had a flashback to an argument I had with my wife, Bella, just a few days earlier. She had said almost the exact same thing to me about my kids. My oldest son is a junior in high school, and he just got his driver's license three weeks ago. He was upset with me, because I wouldn't let him stay out past midnight with the car. After a long argument that ended with my son and I yelling at each other and him slamming the door as he stormed out of the house, my wife told me I need to listen to him. I told her I knew what was best for him.

Even though I didn't agree with my wife's suggestion, I knew what my son would do if he stayed out past midnight. After all, I had been a teenage boy myself once. She had gone on to say other things that were very similar to what Robert had said, only Robert had put it in nicer terms. I can see that I feel the same way about my employees as I do about my son—I know best; they just need to listen and respond to what I have to say.

But wait, I told myself; this situation with Robert is bogus. I'm here to work, not to make friends. Expecting people to do their job and teaching them how to do things the right way is not bad. This is why I'm the boss, not them. I know what is best and how to do things the right way.

I sat there in a daze convincing myself these work traits aren't really faults, as Robert seems to think. After all, these things have

made me successful. I have always worked hard and expected good work from others. Does this mean I'm a bully? Why are people complaining that I'm rude and a horrible manager? How could the traits that have created my reputation of getting things done - traits that have made me so successful - now be considered bad? Isn't that why they hired me? Why are they all of a sudden changing the rules?

Robert said in a kinder voice, "I want you to know I respect the work you have done, and I fully believe you can be even more successful. I take some of the blame for your situation. I should have coached you on this before today. To be honest, it's not easy for me, either. I had a hard time when I first became a manager. I got the same feedback, and it was really difficult for me to understand it and accept it. After all, I was promoted to manager, because I was really good at what I did. And it was my job to teach my direct reports to do just as good of a job as I did, which, I thought, meant teaching them to do things exactly as I do them."

For some reason, I could not see Robert as being this way. He has always been firm when he needed to be, but I have never heard him give someone a direct order. Come to think of it, he has never even told me directly what to do, but he does gently correct and guide me at times. He is able to do this in a way that doesn't make me as defensive as I might have been with someone else. I have never responded well to people telling me what to do. He lets me know that he understands and has faith in me.

"When you hired me, Robert, you knew I wasn't the touchy-feely type. I'm here to do a job and make the company money. That being said, I don't want people to think I'm a jerk and a bully, which is what it sounds like they think of me." As I said these words, I knew I meant them. My shoulders slumped forward, "What do you suggest I do? What did you do to get over these perceptions?" I asked.



Robert told me when he first joined the company, his managers valued revenue growth and production above all else. That was why he was recruited. He had a reputation of unprecedented revenue growth. However, a new CEO was brought in nine months after he joined the company. She changed the culture and the expectations of her leaders.

One of the first things the new CEO did was hire a new COO and a new VP of HR. They were both known for building strong companies with employees as their focus. The biggest change they made was changing the behaviors that were rewarded. Robert admitted that moving from a culture of execution to one of collaboration didn't make sense at first. He felt like the company was getting too soft, and productivity and revenue were going to take a nose dive. He even admitted to considering two other offers from companies that were knocking on his door. But he stuck with this company, and he quickly saw that by putting an effort into collaboration and people, the processes and procedures improved. Departments started to collaborate and teams began leaning on one another. Together, they worked through the processes and achieved the desired goals of the project.

Robert leaned against a chair, sighed deeply and admitted, "It wasn't easy. At times, it was downright painful. I grew up in companies that taught: come in, do your job, and don't complain. After implementing some of the changes, I realized that before this, my direct reports weren't motivated to do good work, and sometimes, they didn't do any work at all. At first, I blamed them. I also blamed the recruiters for saddling me with lazy, incompetent people. I blamed their generation, which I believed made them feel entitled."

I watched Robert's mannerisms and facial expressions. In my imagination, I could envision him as a young man, standing amongst a sea of cubicles with frustration showing on his face as he glared at his employees. This vision did not match the calm, confident executive sitting across from me.

Robert continued, "Finally, I asked myself why my direct reports should listen to me and follow me? Why should they want to work to make me and the team look good? I realized that if my manager behaved like I did, being an authoritarian and looking at me in just the same way to get the work done, I would have quit a long time ago. This was a tough thing for me to realize. But, after that, I really tried to become the person with whom I would want to work with."

I noticed he didn't say 'work for.' This subtle grammatical shift added to his authority and credibility. This was more effective than if he would have banged on the table to emphasize his point.

"I can honestly tell you I'm much happier now and a lot less stressed and tired. It is a true relief not to worry about how every little thing is done, and it sure frees up a lot of time not continually looking over everyone's shoulder. My wife, too, appreciated this change. As much as I would like to think I was a different person at home during that time, that just wasn't the case, and it rarely is."

"True," I said, agreeing, thinking of how my own behavior at home mirrors how I'm in the office.

"I would like you to think about what we've talked about today. Think about if you are open to becoming the type of manager and leader who is concerned with the people side of leadership. It's OK if you aren't; some people are very happy with a solid focus on results. However, that is not the leader or manager this company wants. If you decide you are happy with the way things are, that's fine. I will arrange a severance and give you a recommendation with no hard feelings. If you would like to develop the skills I mentioned, we will work together to see what we can do for your development. This is your choice," he said in a serious tone.

I didn't hesitate and answered, "I want to keep working here, and I want to grow and develop. I know I need to work on my people

skills. I have been so focused on everything else to keep the department running that I haven't given this much thought. But, yes, I'm willing to work on them."

Robert responded, "If you are serious about this, I will warn you, it won't be easy. You may not even truly see the reason why this is important. I'm going to trust you are telling me the truth, and that this is something you would like to work on. Let me think about this for a couple of days. Then, either Monica from HR or I will get in touch with you."

I thanked Robert for the opportunity to let me work on and develop my people skills, and I thanked him for believing in me.

At home, later that night, I told my wife about the conversation. She looked at me skeptically.

"Do you believe what he is saying about the people skills? Do you really think you can learn how to be softer? More importantly, do you want to?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "But it doesn't look like I have a choice."

My wife got up and walked out of the room. I sat in silence for a while, wondering if it would be worth all of this just to keep my job.

## C H A P T E R

# 2

Two days passed, and I still had not heard from Robert or HR. The silence was making me anxious. An email came into my inbox at 4:37 on the third day. I nervously opened the email:

Tom,

We have retained the services of Sonya Jennings for you. She is an executive coach who will help you with the areas that Robert spoke with you about. Please contact her at your earliest convenience. Her contact information is listed below.

Monica Cohen  
Human Resources Manager

I reread the email two more times, disappointed that it didn't contain a "sorry, but you are great the way you are" message.

As I drove home, I was trying not to think about the implications of being forced to see a coach. I know many of the company's senior managers have coaches. Even Robert has been working with one since before I started at this company. Still, I felt like I was broken, and the person was hired to fix me.

Two days later, I walked into the office, knowing I couldn't procrastinate any longer. I closed my door, took a deep breath, and

called Sonya. I explained to her that HR told me to contact her, and there were some things the company wanted me to work on. Even that sounded defensive to me, and I was the one speaking.

Sonya explained that she prefers to meet away from the office at a casual place, so we agreed to meet Friday morning at a local coffee shop. I thought this was a little odd. Who goes to a coffee shop during a work day? I scheduled the appointment, because I knew I needed to look like I was playing the game. In reality, I still wasn't onboard with this 100 percent, but for now, it kept me employed.

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At home Friday morning, after getting dressed, I sauntered into the kitchen and immediately snapped at my son for spilling cereal. Then, I felt irritated that my daughter had forgotten to pack her lunch. When my wife, Bella, pulled me aside and asked what was wrong, it hadn't even occurred to me that I was upset.

I snarled at her and said, "I'm going to waste the first hour of my day with some crazy lady who is going to tell me how awful I am."

Both kids stopped what they were doing and stared at me.

When my wife looked at me quizzically, I reminded her about my agreement to work with an executive coach.

She looked at me skeptically, and then with a half-smile, asked, "Do you honestly think it's going to be that bad?"

"Well, it won't be as fun as going to the dentist," I joked.

As I grumbled to Bella about this being a waste of time and money, I realized I resented Robert, and I felt betrayed. I had enough to do without spending an hour talking to a stranger at a coffee shop.

Bella blocked my path as I reached for the door. Standing on her tiptoes to give me a hug, she said, “Don’t worry, she will like you.”

“I don’t care if she likes me or not. It doesn’t matter,” I replied, releasing her and stepping towards the door.

“Of course, it matters. It’s important that people think highly of you. Don’t worry,” she said, smiling. “She will.”

I shook my head, trying to convince both of us that it didn’t matter what this woman thought of me. Of course, though, my wife was right—it does matter what this person thinks of me. I just wasn’t ready to admit it.

I flashed an apologetic smile at my son and daughter as I headed out the door, wondering what they were thinking as I closed it behind me.

## C H A P T E R

### 3

Bella's parting words were still playing in my head as I opened the door to the coffee shop. I looked at my watch, privately congratulating myself for being right on time, as always.

I scanned the tables of people working on their computers, reading the newspaper, and having private conversations. Finally, in the back of the coffee shop tucked into a corner, I saw Sonya. I recognized her face from the picture on her website. She was petite with blonde hair. She was dressed in black slacks, a cream blouse, and a charcoal jacket with a long, silver necklace. She looked like she had decided to stop and have a cup of coffee on her way to the office, rather than meeting a client. She was definitely not the flowing skirt and cardigan-wearing woman I was expecting.

"Hi," she said as she rose and shook my hand. "Thanks for taking the time to meet with me. I know you have a lot to do today."

You have no idea, lady, I thought, as I sat down. Although she had a soft voice, she exuded confidence, warmth, and intelligence. Plus, she had a cup of strong coffee waiting for me. I got the feeling she doesn't get intimidated easily. For some reason, I felt more like I was meeting a colleague for a cup of coffee instead of meeting with someone who would help me see all my faults.

I looked at her closely, wondering what magic powers she had that could help me, and if I even needed help.

After a little small talk, we got down to business.

"Tell me why you wanted to meet," she said. "The only thing I was told by Monica Cohen was that you might want coaching."

I noticed she used Monica's first and last name, which indicated to me that they had a formal relationship. Despite this, I didn't know if I trusted her comment that Monica hadn't told her anything about me.

I looked around before I answered, feeling conspicuous, although no one was looking directly at us.

"I was told I had to work on my people skills. Even though I constantly exceed every goal they set, it doesn't matter anymore. My boss seems less worried about my numbers and more about how much my direct reports and colleagues like me," I added sheepishly. "Apparently my style rubs people the wrong way."

"If you're getting good numbers, why do you think they want you to change?" she asked curiously.

"That's a good question," I answered. "I was hired a year ago to shake things up and create change. I have streamlined processes and changed a lot of things that make good business sense. But sometimes it's hard to make people see that the changes are good. So far in my life, I've found that people don't want to change, especially if it means they'll have to do more work."

She nodded encouragingly, and I found myself continuing to talk.

"Some people I work with, and even some of my direct reports, put up roadblocks everywhere, and they won't listen to reason. I've been frustrated, and people can see it. I guess there have been complaints about me. I have some really sensitive people on my team, and they don't like it when I hold them accountable. So, HR and my manager said I need to see a coach," I explained.



As I spoke, I could tell that my words sounded defensive and angry. But as I observed Sonya, she listened intently without interrupting.

"I'm tired of being the bad guy and working in a company where no one wants things to change." Frustrated, I continued, "Sometimes I feel like I should just let them hang themselves. It's obvious no one cares that the company isn't going to make it out of this latest financial crisis. The market is down, and our biggest competitor just announced a new product that may have a significant impact on one of our lines of business."

"I can see why you are frustrated, Tom," Sonya said.

"Do they want results or happy people?" I asked, my voice rising. "I'm not sure we can have both."

"I'm wired to get results. Yes, I want my employees to be happy, but happiness comes from doing a good job. At least, to me, it does," I said, settling back into my chair.

"I understand," Sonya said, empathetically. "So, how do you think coaching can help you? Just to warn you, it can be a tough process. My job is to hold a mirror up and help you see yourself in a different way. Are you ready for this? Is this something you really want?"

"I'm not sure if I'm ready for coaching or if I think coaching can help me," I answered honestly. "I've been successful my whole career, and now all of a sudden people are telling me I have to change. I really don't get it, and I'm not sure I want to change."

Sonya nodded, smiling, and said, "I don't blame you. You've been really successful so far. It sounds like you've worked hard to become who you are and accomplish the things you have. You may not see a need to change. This is natural."

I said, "I'm glad to hear you say that, but how much work needs to go into this 'new me' before I'll see results? I don't think I have a lot of time left with this company to prove myself."

"I'm hearing you say two things, Tom. One is you're not sure if coaching can help you, because you're not completely sold on the fact that you need to change. On the other hand, you're asking about how much work it will take to be out of the corporate doghouse. Is it fair of me to ask if you're ready and open for me to coach you?"

I heard what she said, and she makes everything sound so easy. I guess the ball is in my court now, because I'm sure she will report our meeting to HR, and I certainly don't want to give the impression that I'm not playing the game.

I took a few seconds to gather my thoughts, and then I told her, "What I'd like to do is begin the coaching and see where it takes us. Fair?"

Sonya said, "That sounds good. Let's consider this our initial agreement to pursue coaching, but before we meet next time, I want you to really think about whether or not you are satisfied and happy with how things are in your personal life and in your business life. Think about who you are and who you want to be, both at home and at work. Think about how things may be in two years if nothing changes. It honestly may be that it is not the right time for us to work together. You may be happy with the way things are, and you don't see a need for a change. If that is the case, there will be no hard feelings; I promise."

I agreed to this, and we set a time to meet the following week.

As I left the coffee shop and walked to my car, a feeling of relief that washed over me. The tension was gone. I wasn't such a bad person, after all. I decided to take one day at a time, and I was glad it was Friday. I had a whole week to think about what was important to me.