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## *Coaching - How Diversity Impacted Our Journey: A Tale of Two Women*

Rosalynne Price, PH.D.

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# Coaching: How Diversity Impacted Our Journey. A Tale of Two Women

ROSALYNNE PRICE, PH.D.

*In a high performance culture, where achievement is supported, recognized and rewarded, assigning a coach to an exceptional contributor is not unusual. What may be unusual is the perspective which allowed two women from very different frames of reference to adopt a spiritual paradigm and use a family context to stimulate their growth in ways that are measurable, unexpected and of lasting value to the organization. In this article, Price traces the journey of two women, who, while on a quest for exceptional performance, created a model which others could emulate. Price also considers how the diversity of the partners spawned the approach and impacted their joint and unique experiences.*

Picture two women. One was born in a city of six million, the other in a city of 1,000. One grew up with immigrants from many countries, the other in a population with roots from three countries. One had work experience spanning coast to coast and Canada. The other had work experience gained in one state. One was the middle daughter of three children; the other was one of twelve. One was the daughter of a computer design engineer, the other the daughter of a timber man. One was black; the other was white.

What could these two women possibly have in common? How could they map a journey that would be mutually productive? This was the challenge I faced when I, a black organizational development professional, took the year-long coaching assignment to work with Anita, a white manager for a commercial automobile auction company. I took the assignment with two premises in mind. First, the best way to develop someone else is to start with myself. Second, if I believe in myself, I will be able to help others believe in themselves. Anita was part of Executive Leadership Program (ELP), a year-long adventure in self-development for high-potential managers in her company. As part of a select group of leaders with potential, Anita received assessments, assignments, a coach, feedback and several learning experiences designed to accelerate her development and help her increase her leadership skills. The desired outcome of this program was a more competent, confident leader—ready to face new business challenges.

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Among program participants, Anita was unusual: she was already a competent, developed manager. After a career in property management that had spanned several years, Anita was now Assistant General Manager for the auction company. Previously, she had managed condominiums and commercial property, and at her peak she was responsible for 16 buildings, 150 employees and over one million square feet of space. In that position, Anita had managed the office side of the business, addressing both the people and task issues while gleaning knowledge of the industry and gaining the support of her employees and her peers. When she came to her current company, Anita was looking for a change and a challenge. She found both.

When the assistant general manager (AGM) position became available at her new organization, Anita was the qualified but unlikely candidate. She was not an “insider”, and she had not developed her career within the company. But she was recognized as having the customer focus, the drive and the will to win. These were necessary competencies for this organization’s leaders. In a somewhat risky move, the general manager selected Anita for AGM, as the candidate most likely to be able to lead the departments to their goals. Anita was a first at this auction: the first “outsider” to rise up to senior ranks so quickly; the first female to be promoted to AGM; the first AGM to be selected from the “office” ranks rather than sales or operations. Anita had her work cut out for her. Because of her “first” status in many respects, she had challenges. Developing productive, collaborative peer relationships with others on a less accelerated career track was a challenge. Understanding how and why an auction practice might conflict with customer focus was a challenge. Learning other aspects of the business in such a way that it encouraged peer collaboration and initiative was a challenge.

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In the midst of these challenges Anita was selected for the Executive Leadership Program—a compliment, an honor and another challenge in itself. Once Anita was in the pool of candidates that I might mentor, I picked her immediately. I knew that this assignment would be my greatest challenge yet. I had been successful coaching clients of color – my life experience as a black woman allowed my clients and me to relate on multiple levels and to cut to the core of issues quickly, with greater trust and understanding. But how would I do, coaching a white woman whose cultural heritage and life experience were so different from mine? In addition, Anita’s written profile indicated that her background, personality and interests were significantly different from mine. It was clear this coaching assignment would cause me to stretch beyond my comfort zone, to find ways to support a client whose perspectives and needs would likely be much different from mine.

It was a cool grey day in late March when Anita and I met. I went to visit her at her place of business, both to get to know her and to see her environment, and get a sense of how she interacted there. In that visit and the visits that would follow, I learned that Anita would set aside time to devote herself to an effort, yet be accessible when need be for the “critical” incidents that might arise.

*This first visit began with a question: What do you want? Her answer was immediate and clear: “To run my own auction one day.” The second question: What are you afraid of? Her answer: “Failure.” When I heard that, it was as if we were sisters.*

This first visit began with a question: What do you want? Her answer was immediate and clear: “To run my own auction one day.” The second question: What are you afraid of? Her answer: “Failure.” When I heard that, it was as if we were sisters. We came from very different backgrounds, yet we shared two very similar perspectives: we both wanted to accomplish something never before done in our families. She wanted to run an auction; I wanted to get a doctorate. For both of us, failure was not an option. We spent 5 hours together that first day, sharing much about ourselves, and discovering empathy for each other’s struggles and challenges in life beyond racial differences.

Anita was a consummate professional. I knew I had to work hard to add value to the relationship. Discussion of Anita's assessment results was the platform where I began. Anita had completed a Birkman Method® instrument—an assessment of most productive behaviors. She also completed a Profilor—360° feedback from colleagues on management priorities. In addition, she filled out a decision style instrument, and prepared a very introspective self-written journal. She provided details regarding her journey down the path of her career, noting the highs and the lows and what she learned. These assessments gave me a sense of what Anita did; they also gave me a sense of who Anita was—a unique individual viewed from several different perspectives.

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Reviewing the assessments with Anita gave me some data on which we could connect. On several characteristics, we were alike. We were both attempting to learn. We both valued systems, processes, and measurements, but we also valued relationships and sought the opportunity to interact with groups. We were both interested in strategy and goal achievement and behaved toward others in ways that reflected our individualistic outlook. We both were stimulated by variety in our activities and challenges but needed an anchor to keep us steady. On a personal note, we both worked hard at being good parents.

There were characteristics on which we differed. She was sensitive; I was direct. She was collaborative; I was assertive. She was reflective and thoughtful; in my daily life I made decisions with lightning speed. Add to that the differences in our backgrounds. Anita's perspectives grew out of her rural upbringing, being part of a large family, participating in sports and other outdoor activities, and living in a primarily mono-cultural environment. My perspectives derived from a somewhat smaller family, the arts, a career focus and many multi-cultural environments. We were not exactly "two peas in a pod." How could we bridge the differences so that we both could grow?

We talked. We explored the big picture. We envisioned a plan...although neither of us knew then what it would consist of. We spent five hours together that first day. I was in awe of Anita. To see this compact, no-nonsense yet compassionate person make complex decisions in rapid manner, organize financials and report in a way that made sense to laymen. To see her delight and her chagrin at the soccer team she coached in addition to her other responsibilities put me in awe. I had never met anyone like Anita; her simple straightforward values, her family focus, her powerful managerial and interpersonal skills demonstrated regularly told me that I was in for an extraordinary coaching experience. I was not wrong; the best was yet to come. Over the next year, Anita and I framed powerful coaching results through both a spiritual paradigm based on the work of Miguel Ruiz (Ruiz, 1997). We also promoted learning from and through the context of family – an important framework for each of us that transcended racial differences.

When we started coaching, the challenges we might encounter still loomed before me. Although not planned as a part of our coaching, Anita and I were to complete an exceptional experience together—Outward Bound—that would change the course of our relationship. The session was a part of Anita's ELP program, but coaches normally didn't attend. Fortunately, I was able to attend during Anita's course and it provided a powerful boost to our relationship.



Outward Bound is an outdoor experience crafted to test your endurance, stretch your skill sets and cause you to reflect about your talents, your goals and your relationships. While in the North Carolina Mountains, Anita and I hiked the mountain side, rappelled, slept outdoors and completed other strenuous physical and mental activities. We learned the importance and value of community. We learned that we could accomplish things we previously thought were not possible. Although all participants had challenges, Anita and I had additional pressures. To ease the strain on her knees, Anita had to walk with canes. In spite, or maybe because of this situation, she was the first in line for each of the physical challenges we faced. Table Rock was one...and it was where one of our greatest insights was gained:

As Anita relates it: “The hike to Table Rock set the tone for the entire trip for me. We “catapillared” up the trail and these virtual strangers were always making sure that I was OK. We pushed and pulled ourselves and each other through Devil’s Cellar and passed along back packs and walking sticks until we made it to the top. When my teammates pulled me over that last rock, that was the first of many ‘AHA’ moments. We made it because we helped each other; we reached out to each other and we felt closer. I think it’s funny that I was so ready and willing to accept help from these people that I had just met hours ago because I needed them. However, in my life back home I was reluctant to reach out to people: people that wanted to help and people that wanted to be there for me...I found out how much reaching out to someone and asking for help can improve your relationships.”

That insight informed the rest of our experience and shaped our behavior. Although the challenges were difficult, a sense of community was formed. Anyone who served in that community became a member—because of the contribution they made. I was accepted as a member of the community. Although no one knew it, I was not supposed to be at Outward Bound. It was really designed for ELP participants—not the coaches. I chose to be there, and even though sick with bronchitis, participated in all the activities. I think this was important to Anita, because it demonstrated, more than words could, that I was there for her to reach out to.

I believe our shared Outward Bound experience enabled us to quickly develop a degree of trust and ease of communication. Once we had that we began our work. Anita set some specific goals that would better equip her for a General Manager (GM) role and crafted an action plan. Because she was in Ohio, and I was in Georgia, we spoke on the phone every week or two and I visited with her whenever I came to Ohio—about once every three months. During our regularly scheduled conversations, Anita updated me on her progress against goals as well as new challenges she faced. Anita’s goals focused on addressing conflict and enhancing motivation skills, learning more about operations and gathering more industry expertise. An interesting aspect of this plan was that it applied as much to Anita’s personal life as it did to her professional one.

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As a dedicated soccer coach and mother of two young adults, Anita was always seeking more knowledge about the game, more alternatives for parenting and more ways to motivate more effectively. We used our common experiences as parents to further ground Anita's development. In addition, we found common ground in a spiritual paradigm that helped both of us learn as Anita developed her leadership skills.

In personal as well as professional settings, addressing conflict effectively and enhancing relationships were equally important and necessary. In related work with multi-cultural students, I discovered a set of concepts that was going to become very important for us both. Those concepts were discussed in the book, *The Four Agreements*. In it, Miguel Ruiz outlines four principles that can enhance relationships; these principles would subsequently change the way we interact with others. An example: "Don't take it personally." Ruiz suggests that what a person communicates is a reflection of them and their inner state of mind rather than of you. A smile is a reflection of that person's inner happiness. A frown is a reflection of that person's inner discord. Anita and I discovered how freeing and how empowering it was to have these four tenets to guide our interactions. Even though they were not postulated as religion, we found they were congruent with the faith and values that each of us uniquely held. We also discovered they were effective in dealing with our employees and –especially—our family members. For Anita, this meant her daughter; for me, my son.

When Anita and I finished the year of coaching, we did not finish our friendship. Anita had accomplished many of her goals. As evidenced by feedback from her colleagues and friends, she was better able to address conflict; she had developed from an auction industry "rookie" to an auction industry "journeyman" and she had broadened her motivational skills. She had also built several key alliances through assessing and working with the managers to develop processes in certain key areas of the auction. These were relationships she would not have had the opportunity to develop otherwise. The impact of this effort was such that it was continued into the next year. Managers were motivated by their results. They had saved over \$90,000 in five key areas.

*By Anita's own account, one of the most powerful lessons she learned was the power of relationships, the importance of being able to ask for help and being able to accept it.*

By Anita's own account, one of the most powerful lessons she learned was the power of relationships, the importance of being able to ask for help and being able to accept it. We maintain our relationship now, talking occasionally, sharing resources when we can and working together to enhance the relationships of the people in her auction. I know I can count on her and she knows she can count on me.

What accounts for the successful outcomes achieved by Anita and myself? I don't know for certain. But I have a suspicion that it's because I had the privilege of coaching a heroine who was open enough to ask for and learn from the divergent perspectives I offered. Anita was willing to consider the fact that others had very different ways of thinking, and to expand her skill at dealing with others significantly as a result. In the process of her coaching, we developed frameworks for people from very different backgrounds to learn and grow together – and in the process Anita became a skilful leader.

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As Manager of Diversity for a large media conglomerate, Cox Enterprises, Inc., Rosalynne has the opportunity to consult on a variety of issues, in many settings, with clients whose expectations diverge widely. This continuously shapes her ability to observe, to react, to synthesize, and to sell. In her role she coaches, mentors and designs programs to enhance the performance of her varied client base. Rosalynne lives in Atlanta with her husband and – off and on – her (college-aged) offspring in a wonderful community that believes that anything is possible if you work hard enough.

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