

It's All In The Game

Toni's meeting with Ron last week had gone well. Her commitment to using his metaphor was growing as was her competence for understanding its application in global business.

She felt comfortable with Ron's leadership style. She could see a shift in his communications. When they first met, he did most of the talking and would ask an occasional question. Now, their dialogue was more two-way, with both asking questions of each other to help clarify and gain understanding. All in all, she was feeling more positive about her progress and their relationship. In her journal, she added several new leader attributes and behaviors she saw in Ron:

*Honest, Sense of Humor, Anticipates, Committed, Problem Solver
Win-Win Negotiator, Admits Mistakes, Motive Arouser, Foresighted*

She wondered to herself just how long this list would get.

That Monday afternoon Ron stopped by to let her know he needed to return to Sao Paulo the following week to meet with Ricardo Aurelio, president of Sentra Development Group. He invited her to join him so she would have the opportunity to meet Carlos Rio, Manager of Business Development-South America. Like Grove, he would be on the team reporting to her.

Toni hoped she would be as delighted with Carlos as she had been with Grove. Grove's knowledge of the business was a real asset. She now understood why he had such a strong reputation when it came to coaching, mentoring, and team building.

Ron's day progressed with a few surprises. His return to Brazil next week to meet with an upset customer was unexpected. However, he knew the value of being decisive

when it came to dealing with customer issues, real or imagined. He saw the trip as an opportunity to introduce Toni to Carlos, so all was not lost.

He was very satisfied with Toni's progress to date. Her commitment to learning was high. She was learning quickly in all areas of her new job, including gaining competence in soccer's application to the business. His job was to keep developing her commitment and competence. That way she would move forward rather than regress as she learned her new job. Regression in a new job was something he anticipated with any employee, including Toni. A big part of his success, he believed, was tied to how well he was able to help her work through this, if needed.

"Toni, this is Tom Haas. How are you this afternoon?"

"Fine, thanks"

"Glad to hear it. Toni, I am going to be in Portland tomorrow. I was wondering if I could talk you into having a cup of coffee with me in the morning, say seven o'clock at the Coffee Club on Jefferson and Third? I think that's close to your office."

Before responding Toni thought about the idea of "keeping her options open" in today's business world. "Okay. But I only have about thirty minutes."

"That will work."

Tuesday morning Toni walked into the Coffee Club, surprised to find it empty. After ordering a latte, she turned to see a man enter the shop.

"Are you Toni Burns, by any chance?" he asked.

"Yes, I am."

“I’m Tom Haas,” he said while shaking hands. “Thanks so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with me.”

“Today is just one of those days when I need to be in the office,” Toni said, grinning nervously, as they sat at a table in the corner of the coffee shop.

“I understand. Since we only have a few minutes, let me get to the point. My firm has targeted you for the position we talked about earlier. That’s why I wanted to meet you.”

“Why me?”

“Let me give you the short answer. Through our industry research and contacts, we have been told that you are an excellent project engineer. As I may have said earlier, good engineers are hard to find, especially in your industry.”

“I’ve heard that before,” she said, wincing slightly.

“May I ask what your current role is?”

“I was recently promoted to the position of Manager of Global Business Development.”

“And before that you were a project engineer?”

“Yes. For the previous six years.”

“That must mean you work for Ron Posada?”

“Yes.”

“Good man. Big on all that ‘team stuff’ from what I hear.”

“The whole company is,” Toni replied with a confident tone in her voice.

“Well, the firm I represent is more traditional in how they manage, if you know what I mean. I can’t tell you who I represent at this time.”

“I understand.”

“Toni, I would like to leave you with an information packet: job description, pay range, and the like. As I said before, we have some time here. If you’re interested in pursuing this opportunity, please call me. At that point, I would meet with you again and fill you in on the company. From there we would schedule you to meet with the hiring manager. If you decide to pursue this, the process will be handled in a highly confidential manner. Our firm makes that guarantee. Any questions?”

“No. Not really.”

“It’s been nice meeting with you. Thanks again and have a great day.”

“Thank you,” Toni said as she rose to leave.

Ron had suggested in an earlier meeting that Toni meet his father. That way, he thought, she would have the ability to hear a coach’s perspective on soccer’s inherent benefits to individuals, teams, and organizations.

As Toni and Ron walked across the university campus on Tuesday afternoon, Toni felt surprisingly excited about meeting Ron’s father. Although Ron only talked about him briefly up to this point in time, she heard others in the office raved about him. He had coached Ron in soccer from the time he was a young boy through high school. He was so effective that Ron earned a scholarship to play soccer at a major university.

“Dad is now retired as a high school coach,” Ron said. “For the past few years, he’s been volunteering as an assistant coach here at the university for the women’s team.

“I bet he has a lot to offer the team.”

“I’ve heard he’s had a real positive impact. It’s also kept him in the game, which is good. Before we meet my father,” Ron said, “let me give you a running start on what

he's going to share with you by saying:

Soccer is not position-driven

“The team’s work consists of advancing the ball to score goals while defending its own goal to keep the opponent from scoring. Eleven players on each team are called upon to play ninety minutes, divided into two forty-five-minute halves. Because soccer is not position-driven, you find players moving up and down the field doing *many* things and serving *various* roles over the course of the game. For example, a player may be playing offense, trying to score a goal at one time. A minute later, that same player may be defending or trying to stop an opponent from advancing the ball down the field.”

“Grove pointed that out last Saturday at the game. It was interesting to see how players changed roles at a moment’s notice. It was also very apparent they had to be able to think while playing – and play while thinking – to compete.”

“That’s why Grove refers to soccer as a ‘thinking’ persons sport and firmly believes in its application to global business. Again, we ask our people to do the same thing.”

“Good point.”

“From your experience on Saturday, you know that each team has a goalkeeper. These are the only players who may be described as *partially* position-driven. This means they can use their hands to keep their opponent from scoring a goal. This is only limited, however, to a very small part of the playing field in front of each goal area. The goalkeeper also has the flexibility to move out of that playing area and assist other teammates as needed. Once goalkeepers leave the goal area, however, they can no longer use their hands. This means they are no longer position driven.”

“Your description so far really sounds like the global business model,” Toni said. “I

can definitely relate to the need to be skillfully adaptable and play various roles in my job.”

“Again, think about how your old job was becoming increasingly decentralized and time challenged. And the future has not changed. In fact, we all must be able to continually make better decisions on the global business field to help the company survive!”

Toni nodded.

“Toni, I’d like you to meet my father,” Ron said as they were interrupted by a gentleman walking down the stairs in front of them.

“Nice to meet you, Toni. Please call me Alex. Ron has mentioned you in the past few weeks. I understand you are now on his global business team. Congratulations!”

“Thank you. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you,” Toni said, extending her hand to greet him.

“As you know, Dad was my soccer coach through high school,” Ron said with a broad grin on his face. “He taught me everything I know about the game of soccer – and the game of life for that matter.”

“Maybe the game of life,” Alex said, “but not the game of soccer. You had a pretty good college coach as I remember. Let’s give him credit here!”

“Okay. You win on that one,” Ron said while taking a seat on the steps. “Toni, I asked Dad to meet with us this afternoon to give you his perspective on soccer and its role in helping develop people. Dad is now retired as a high school coach, and he has been volunteering as an assistant coach at the university for the women’s team. So he has a pretty unique perspective to share with you on the game and how it relates to leadership

development, for example.”

“Thanks for the introduction, Ron. Let’s hope I can live up to the billing.”

“Now, don’t be so modest,” Ron teased.

“First of all,” Alex said, “soccer is a very attractive sport to play, especially for female athletes. When we look at the prerequisites for playing soccer, there really are relatively few, if any! Soccer players come in all shapes and sizes. Unlike a number of other sports where size is typically seen as a prerequisite – and advantage – soccer does not have that built-in limitation. So:

Everybody Can Play

“There’s a story I like to share with people to illustrate this point,” Alex continued.

“Back in 1976 I had the opportunity to meet Pele, the great Brazilian soccer player. This happened in Seattle before the North American Soccer League’s championship game. Many people today regard Pele as the greatest soccer player to have played the game – in the world! The one thing that impressed me the most about meeting him was his size. I am 5’10” ...I would guess that he was 5’7” ...maybe? I had seen him on TV a number of times playing in the world cup games for Brazil, but I had no idea he was that small. So, I like to tell folks that in soccer size does *not* matter!”

“That’s a great story!” Toni said. “I bet it really resonates with everyone you share it with.”

“Thanks, it’s one of my favorites.”

“The game of soccer crosses other personal boundaries as well,” Ron said. “Besides gender, we’re talking about age, race, and ethnic background for example.”

“So, you find diversity,” Alex said, “present in the make-up of players and coaches on

many of the great professional teams in Europe and throughout the world. Diversity brings strength to soccer teams and reinforces the *universal* partnership the world has for the game.”

More and more, Ron was totally convinced that:

***Diversity is a prerequisite for American industry
in partnering and competing in a global business world.***

Ron saw the need to embrace diversity as a key ingredient to competing globally. Here, TAG Industries had to be the “best” player in their respective markets. This translated into being totally customer focused in terms of speed, cost, quality, service, and the like. Ron was convinced the only way he could achieve and sustain this status was through a *team orientation built on collaboration*. And the only way he knew how to achieve this was through embracing diversity, where people accepted individual differences as strengths. Here he was thinking of diversity in its broadest sense: skills, talents, functions, personalities, race, age, gender, cultures, generations, etc. Perhaps most important was the need for diversity of *ideas*. Not only would diversity help to attract the best talent in the world, it would serve as his springboard for establishing team trust. In the end, without team trust there was no way his people would be able and willing to effectively collaborate.

“The women that I help coach here at the university,” Alex continued, “view soccer as the *only* game that provides them with the opportunity to gain real team skills.”

Toni looked puzzled. “Can you clarify what you mean here?”

“They would tell you that soccer provides them with a better understanding of the *interdependent* nature of the team experience. They can’t find that same experience

playing other sports.”

For a moment, Ron was reminded of a mentor who predicted some time ago that the number of women entering the business world and management ranks would continue to grow. At the same time, he was promoting soccer as the only *real* team sport that would provide the kind of learning opportunity for women that could be readily transferred from the playing field to the business field. This all had to do with understanding that the successful leader in the future had to have a team orientation, with the *network* representing the future global business model in organizations.

“Mind if I paraphrase what you’ve said?” Toni asked.

Alex grinned as Toni restated his premise:

***Soccer provides the best example of what the
interdependent nature of the team experience looks like!***

“No question about it!” Alex said emphatically. “Male or female, it doesn’t matter what gender we’re talking about here. The learning connection here is the same. Ron, you played the game at a pretty high level. Would you agree?”

“Absolutely! When you look at the interdependent nature of the game, you must recognize that associated leadership skills like *collaboration*, for example, are learned as a result of playing the game. The fact that a mutual dependency exists between players promotes collaboration on the soccer field.”

“Grove pointed that out at the game. He went on to say that collaboration may become the number *one* business practice leading to success. This was based on the ever-increasing economic interdependence taking place in the global economy.”

“Grove’s definitely right on there,” Ron said.

Before responding, Toni was reminded of her history lesson with Grove:

Soccer taught things like character, discipline, self-sacrifice, cooperation, interdependence, and the like...all important to team success.

“Are you suggesting, too,” Toni asked, “that people in management positions who have not played a real team game like soccer may be at a disadvantage working in global business?”

“To some degree – yes,” Ron said. “Again, all one has to do is look at the experience men, for example, have traditionally picked up from playing sports. We have all seen how that experience has played itself out time and time again in business. In my case, I relate well to my experience from playing soccer and have made numerous connections to global business. But, at the same time, I would be the first to tell you that there are other ways for people to learn how a real team operates. Training is just one example.”

Once again, Toni was reminded of her history lesson a few weeks ago with Grove. He had mentioned that soccer was regarded in the 1800s in Great Britain as a powerful force in the educational process. “Ron, you’ve answered my question.”

“Great question, Toni.”

“Ron, I think I’m beginning to really understand how soccer’s operating principles connect to global business. If soccer was position-driven, for example, it would not make the same leadership and business connections we’re talking about here. Right?”

“Yes! Bottom line, we’re talking about relying on one another, along with emphasizing the team’s success versus the individual’s success,” Ron said.

Indeed, as a former high school coach, Alex had spent most of his adult life dealing with the conflict between team versus individual success – or values. He had been part of a system that emphasized individual responsibility and performance over team

performance. Alex saw soccer as an opportunity to *reconcile* the values conflict between individual performance and team performance. Historically, the conflict had always been an either/or argument, with the values presented as opposites on a continuum. However:

The reconciliation that soccer offered was not a question of dealing with the values in an either-or application, but understanding that both individual and team values are needed to compete.

In soccer and global business, this means placing the focus on results produced when all positions interact on the field. Individual accountability remains an important ingredient in the process of producing the team's results. Individual players remain responsible for their skill development, which ultimately plays into or affects the team's development. The focus on individual development ultimately provides teams with the ability to determine what team skills are needed. This *cycle* of managing both individual and team development helps to ensure the process for producing team results is working.

"Dad, how are we doing for time?" Ron asked.

"I've got a few more minutes before I have to head off to the practice field."

"Good," Ron said.

"Let me also say that *multiple* skills are needed to play soccer," Alex continued.

"Each player needs to be able to control the ball in the air and on the ground with both feet and the other parts of the body except for the hands, to change roles, and to play both offense and defense as the flow of the game dictates."

"Toni and I briefly talked about this earlier," Ron said.

"Then you really understand why a soccer player's ability to do many things reinforces the idea that soccer is not position-driven," Alex said. "In soccer, the need for people who are skilled and adaptable applies to both the individual and the team who

are expected to manage their entire work effort. In effect:

***The soccer team is a self-directed unit
charged with performing the work needing to be done***

“On top of that, the game is very fluid,” Ron said, his eyes searching Toni’s to ensure that he was not guilty of overwhelming her with too much data at once. “It’s played in a continuous tempo under changing conditions. If that doesn’t sound like the global business model, I don’t know what does!”

Toni agreed. “I can see why:

Skilled, adaptable people are needed in both soccer and global business

“Soccer is also played on a larger field than most other sports,” Alex said glancing over at Toni. “It requires that all players understand the bigger picture: team strategy, game-plan, goals, opponent’s strengths and weaknesses, and more – all so important to the team’s success. In summation:

***Understanding the bigger picture ‘empowers’ all players on the field to
make decisions, take risks, and manage and anticipate change
as the flow of the game dictates***

“The soccer team,” Ron said, “is really a self-directed team operating on a real-time, continuous schedule. Individual players and the team must be able to respond to changing conditions on their own! Except for serious injury on the field, there are no opportunities to stop the game to plan a strategy, to give players a rest, or to slow down the opposition’s momentum.”

“Now that really sounds like global business,” Toni remarked.

“When we talk about global business,” Ron said, “we describe it as an interdependent network that is becoming increasingly decentralized. People working under this model are continuously challenged to make better decisions under changing

conditions to compete. Here, the knowledge worker has certainly replaced the mass production worker of the past. Multi-skills, self-direction, and teamwork are the current and future realities.”

“That’s the game of soccer in a nutshell!” Alex said emphatically.

All these characteristics, Toni realized, were representative of a *real* team and its current and future application in the global business world.

“Let me make one more point about soccer before I take off,” Alex said. “People who have played soccer often have a good understanding of how to anticipate and manage change! Good soccer coaches teach people to look for the open space. That’s where the opportunities exist for moving the ball up and down the field, maintain control on the field, and score goals. Being able to anticipate is a critical skill in playing soccer.”

“What about people – like me – who have not played soccer? What does this mean?” Toni asked, challenging Ron.

“Good question,” Ron said. “I believe by developing your knowledge of the game like we’re doing, you will understand and become aware of what it means to anticipate, for example, on the business field. Hopefully, you can transfer this to your job performance, at least in the form of helping develop your business *competencies*. So, playing the game is not the end-all here.”

“Mind-set *before* skill-set sounds like the formula you’re describing?” Toni asked.

“No question about it. We are building your commitment level for learning *new* competencies. Here we’re talking about both organizational and job competencies.

“Can you give me an example?” she asked.

“Sure. Let’s start with organizational competencies. There are a number of these that

match up with each one of soccer's operating principles. For example, when we say, 'focus on team – not position' competencies like 'adaptability' and 'learning agility' come to mind. Since we are using soccer's metaphor as a key part of our operating framework or model, that means our people need to be skilled in these 'core' competencies to succeed in our team-based business environment. Does that make sense?"

Toni nodded.

"Good. Let's talk about *job* competencies next. There are a number of these that match up with your new role as a global manager. 'Team management' is a prime example."

Toni laughed lightly. "No surprises there."

"Regardless of which competencies we talk about, the goal is to get you skilled in these competencies."

"Wow!" Toni said after saying goodbye to Alex. "Is he always that enthusiastic?"

"He can be. Especially if he gets talking about something he's passionate about like soccer."

"I see where you get your passion for soccer."

"Oh, yeah. His influence on me has been strong. That's partly why I continue to believe in soccer and its application in the global business world."

"Nick, let's go out tonight for dinner," Toni said as she walked through the door that evening.

“What do you have in mind?”

“Anything. How about Mexican?”

“That works for me. Let’s go to Garcia’s place.”

After sipping a margarita Toni reluctantly said, “Guess what I did today?”

“What?” Nick said while glancing down at the menu.

“You’re not much fun! I met with Tom Haas, the recruiter from Seattle, before I went to the office.

“No kidding!” he said, looking up from the menu. “How did it go? What did he say?”

“First he told me that his firm had targeted me as a candidate. He didn’t say who he represented. He left me with a package of information including a job description and pay range. He said to give him a call if I’m interested. They have six months to fill the job.”

“Anything else?”

“He seemed like a nice guy and was very professional. He also knew a lot about TAG and Ron in particular.”

“That’s his job. What did he say?”

“He said Ron was a good man, recognized for promoting all that ‘team stuff’ to use his words.”

“That’s interesting.”

“Yeah, I thought so, too. He also said the company he represented was more ‘traditional’ in their management practices.”

“Sounds like they don’t have someone like Ron who is managing using team-based principles. Or they don’t have a culture like TAG’s.”

“That’s probably it,” she said.

“My guess, maybe he threw that comment out there to get you thinking about the idea of working for a company with a more traditional culture.”

“I’ve heard before that team-based cultures don’t work for everyone,” Toni said. “At least that’s the argument.”

“Okay. So how are you feeling? What are your thoughts?”

“I’m not really sure. Mixed emotions, I guess. On the one hand there are some attractive features about this opportunity. I would be working in domestic operations like before. I would be working in engineering, which is something I’m good at and enjoy. He led me to believe that I would be making more money than I did in my old job. He also mentioned that I would not have to deal with all the air travel, insinuating that it has been known to cause marital problems.”

Nick maintained eye contact with Toni while taking in her feedback.

“On the other hand,” Toni continued, “this would not be a good developmental opportunity for me. Becoming a manager is a short-term goal I’ve had for the past two years. That’s why I accepted Ron’s offer in the first place. My long-term goal is to run a global business, so working for Ron is a step in that direction. Also, his team-based strategy is working well. Finally, my relationship with Ron is growing, and I think that’s an important consideration for staying with TAG.”

“I see now that you’ve really have been thinking about things.”

“That’s why I wanted to go out tonight and talk. This can get to be a little

overwhelming to say the least.”

“I did say it was always good to keep your options open. I think so far, you’ve done things in a professional way. However, you can’t sit on the fence indefinitely. At some point you have to make a decision. If TAG is the direction that works for you at this point in your career, then stick with it. If not, perhaps this other opportunity is a viable option.”