



Leadership: Do Underdogs Really Win?

By Chris Pehura

The best stories out there are the stories about the underdogs. It makes for a good movie even a great video game. But in our non-fiction world, a world where dog eats dog, underdogs get eaten.

Bob has been with a prestigious Fortune company for over four decades. He was crucial for making this company what it is today. Now serving as the chief operations and strategy officer he sees once again his company needing to change to a customer centric business model. This isn't the first time. For years the company changed back and forth from being a customer centric company to an operational one. He remembers the cuts, the attrition, and the fear each time these "shifts" happened. So this time around he brought in some experts to do that stressful heavy lifting. Bob brought in me and my team to set up and manage the strategic change program.

Just prior to the program's kickoff, Bob broke the news that the CEO pushed through approvals for a "big dog" firm to do an assessment on the company's leadership, business model, and talent. It turns out a senior partner for the firm was Alex, the CEO's buddy from college. Bob leaned in and said "I hope you get what I'm saying Chris." Yes, oh yes I knew exactly what he was saying.

"Though our work has been approved and we were fully funded, Alex will see us as competition. And since he has the ear of the CEO, my team and I could be out in a matter of weeks."

We had less than a month to demonstrate our value to the CEO. We were a small boutique firm, highly specialized, with a lot less available bodies than Alex's. We had no choice. We had to work smart. To demonstrate our value we built a strong narrative for the company and showed how we are the ones that best fit into that narrative. We tested this narrative with key stakeholders in the organization through passive walkabouts and relaxed standup meetings.

“Bob was crucial for developing the narrative. With his help we developed a forty year narrative of how the company operated and why. It was forty pages of pictures with each picture supported by information sources and financial facts.”

With management consulting, management science, and data science we used that narrative to construct an end-to-end model of how the business has been operating for the last forty years with reasonable forecasts on where the company is headed. To further develop the model we needed to have deeper interviews. This was next to impossible because of the assessment Alex's big dogs were monopolizing all the time of the people we needed. We had no choice but to meet with key people while they were taking their lunch.

“To solidify the narrative and the model we took people off-site to one-on-one lunches and coffees. We worked all that we discovered into the narrative and reinforced the narrative with the right model and correct evidence. We also learned just how much Alex's teams were shaking things up and we did what we could to work that into the narrative as well.”

Once the narrative was solid it was time to meet with Alex to see how we could best work together. I admit I was a little over prepared. And I had to be. When an underdog faces off with a big dog, three things can happen. The underdog is ignored. The underdog becomes a subordinate. Or the underdog is eaten. It was an important meeting.

“Alex was late twenty minutes. Once he came in we shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. Then he looked me straight in the eye. He said my team and I are out after the assessment is completed. He said that he was being nice to give me a heads up. Our meeting lasted three minutes.”

When Alex's team was ready to present at executive monthly meeting, we squeezed onto the meeting's agenda. Alex and his big dogs presented for an hour. We squeezed in our presentation in the last fifteen minutes. Even with that short time frame our presentation with its animations, narrative, and financial forecasts was received very well.

“I wasn't surprised when Alex and his big dogs presented a twenty five page presentation overloaded with charts and bullet points. Our presentation was a minimalist approach emphasizing an emotionally strong narrative supported by key evidence.”

A day after Bob walks by with all smiles. He said we're all on track with the strategic change program. Then he asked me if I'd feel comfortable being the single point of contact for Alex's firm.

Do underdogs really win? Yes they do, when they work smarter, then harder.

Three years later, my team and I were structuring a regulatory compliance program for a new client. At the last minute I was asked to join in a meeting to size up a consulting firm they're thinking of bringing in.

When I came into the room, I saw Alex ready to give us a presentation.

About the Author



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Chris is a management consultant with a data emphasis helping Fortune 100/1000 companies strategically evolve and reinvent their businesses to maximize their revenue growth. Through realignment, to overhauls, to rebuilding things from the top down and ground up, he integrates and solidifies leaders, strategies, and solutions into all aspects of the organization. As practice director for [C-SUITE DATA](#), a Canadian based consulting firm specializing in data and Big Data, Chris serves as a coach, trainer, and the voice for how data is the new capital that drives, multiplies, and maximizes revenue growth.



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