

Staffing and HR Consulting, Workforce Development And Analytics for the Federal Government



LaJuanna Russell
CEO and Founder

CEOCFO: *Ms. Russell, what was the concept when you started Business Management Associates? What is the focus today?*

Ms. Russell: We started Business Management Associates in 2005. I actually started it alone at my kitchen table with about \$500. I had been working in the federal sector with other federal organizations, working on some technology projects and process projects. I became frustrated because the “people part” of those projects was missing. We would be developing a new IT product for someone in the office, but that person who we were doing the development for was never in on our meetings. Therefore, I wanted to create a company model that integrated people and process and make sure that the people part was included in on these types of implementations. Over the years we have really honed in on the people part. Now we focus on human performance from end to end. Therefore, every aspect of HR, workforce development, workforce analytics and so on are places where we play.

CEOCFO: *Who is coming to you for services?*

Ms. Russell: We primarily service the federal government. Therefore, all of our customers are within that space. The customers that will seek us out typically are those who are having trouble finding the right person for the right seat on the bus. They have a goal and a mission to do X or Y and they need certain staff to do that. They come to us for our expertise, either in helping them hone in and determine what kind of staff they need a competency perspective or they will call us to help them find the right people.

CEOCFO: *How do you go about understanding what a client really needs and should want?*

Ms. Russell: It is so often quite the opposite, really! They never actually truly know what they want. They know what they have money for. They may not know how to solve the problem. In some cases you have to do what they want before you can do what you want. I have a thirteen year old daughter and that is something that I tell her all the time. “Mommy, I want to do X and Y.” I say, “Well that might make sense, but until you can do what you want you have to do what I want, so that I am satisfied.” It is really almost the same as with working with customers – and that holds steady for customers beyond federal customers. You understand what it is they truly need, but in order for a customer to see you as that trusted advisor, you have to give them what they say they want first. Show them what that is doing for them and then say, “But I recommend that we do X,” and show them how that will get them to what they really need and more often than not that works.

CEOCFO: *When you are assessing a project what might you look at that not everyone realizes should be part of the mix?*

Ms. Russell: We do a very, very deep dive into the organizational structure. Many folks will go right to the process. They will go right to the duties and what you are supposed to do. Then they do not really look at the org structure to make sure they understand how the organization is set up to perform. In some federal organizations you might know it unless you really look at an org structure and you ask the right questions. As an example, there is the GS structure; the GS hierarchy. You should not have one GS-15 level leader in that organization having another one or two or three GS-15 folks reporting to that same 15. They are all on the same level. Therefore, if I am a 15, but I am reporting to a 15 why should I listen to what the 15 above me is saying? Therefore, just in your org structure, already you have created a problem for yourself, because you are not able to lead a true team and get buy-ins if everyone believes that they are in control of their own destiny. Therefore, the org structure is very, very important. Then from there we definitely then go into the role of the responsibilities, making sure they are clear, established and not out of date. Sometimes position descriptions are from

2008 or before, but when the person is in a technology role for instance, that person is not performing at the level of 2015, where they should be.

CEOCFO: *Are there particular agencies that you prefer to work with; particular types of projects?*

Ms. Russell: We structure the company very tightly surrounding our vertical markets. In the beginning I was very focused on insuring that we would not be like competitors who would say, “We work for the federal government.” Well, that is a very, very, very broad stroke. I know that only if you are one of the big, big companies can you really truly work for the entire federal government. Therefore, as a small company we were very intentional in structuring what we call our vertical market or our market segments. One of those is law enforcement and public safety, so we will look at those agencies that focus on law enforcement; Department of Homeland Security, Justice and so on. Our other segment is financial management and financial services. Therefore, we work very closely with Treasury, HUD, CFPB, SEC and other organizations that are in the financial market. We are starting to get a little into energy and into health. Those two are kind of burgeoning verticals for us. However, the main verticals that we really hone in on and look for clients in are law enforcement and financial management and services. That really helps us from a marketing perspective. That is because over time you build a strong level of subject matter expertise in those markets. Therefore, not only can we say we understand the HR needs of that market, but we also understand, from a subject matter perspective, everything that is going on in that space. We know the data issues for law enforcement and for financial management, etc.

“You understand what it is they truly need, but in order for a customer to see you as that trusted advisor, you have to give them what they say they want first... In the beginning I was very focused on insuring that we would not be like competitors who would say, “We work for the federal government.” Well, that is a very, very, very broad stroke... We can train you in Access. Sometimes we can train you on workforce analytics or workforce development. I cannot train you to have a positive attitude. I cannot train you to have initiative. I cannot train you to want to be your best everyday... At the end of the day, I do not have a big name floating behind me. I have my name.”- LaJuanna Russell

CEOCFO: *Are organizations coming to you or do you have to reach out and bid for just about everything?*

Ms. Russell: It is a little bit of both. We have some projects where organizations have come directly to us. With everything in the government you do have to bid eventually. No one walks up to you and gives you a contract without having some kind of solicitation and some kind of proposal. Therefore, even if an organization is coming to us we have to determine the correct contract vehicle so that that organization can reach us. Then we have to determine whether or not we can do it as a sole source. There are very few contract vehicles that allow sole source contracting. However, even in a sole source environment, the government has to look at three or four other companies to compare. Therefore, relationships will start and an organization will say, “I like your approach, I like the way that you guys do business,” but there is still that, “Let us see what the market research says; if I can get approval from contracting then you are definitely our chosen firm.” There is always a proposal from us at that point.

CEOCFO: *What do you look for in your people? What are the intangibles necessary to represent Business Management Associates?*

Ms. Russell: They should definitely be a team player and have a great attitude – a positive, can do attitude, with the understanding that we are all in this together and we work hard together and side by side. If there is one person on a team that is whiney or self focused or just needs more than others on the team, it can destroy the entire team. That is because you find that everyone is focusing in on that one person. We can train skills. We can show you how to use Excel. We can train you in Access. Sometimes we can train you on workforce analytics or workforce development. I cannot train you to have a positive attitude. I cannot train you to have initiative. I cannot train you to want to be your best everyday. Therefore, those are the things that we look for.

CEOCFO: *Given a choice, are there particular types of projects that you prefer and enjoy?*

Ms. Russell: I personally love process projects. I love a project where all of the elements come together, where we are understanding the organization, understanding the people and how they work through the process and making sure that the processes within that organization match up to the organizational roles and the responsibilities. Then if there is IT that has to follow along, it follows on in a natural progression of being an enabling solution verses the IT part coming first and the you are trying to figure out how to mold your people and processes around it. We see that way too much. However, when an organization understands that IT just enables your performance, they start to understand how IT then enhances performance. First let us figure out what that performance should be; that is the perfect project. Thankfully, we have a few of those, which makes it a lot of fun.

CEOCFO: *There is a lot of scrutiny of government projects, particularly in the technology area. Does it concern you? Have you changed what you do at all?*

Ms. Russell: Yes. Unfortunately, I can give you fifty examples of firms where I know they do things kind of under that umbrella, where they will bid a very, very senior person to come in to do the work. That person actually only has five hours on the project and they have some junior right out of college that is really doing the work who has no idea what he or she is going. I see that all the time. As I said at the beginning, I started this company myself at my kitchen table. Therefore, I take pride in what we have been able to develop and I take pride in what I deliver. That is because, at the end of the day, I do not have a big name floating behind me. I have my name and it is very important for me to insure that my name and my integrity maintains throughout this process, so I can sleep at night. In terms of how do we circumvent that, we do what we say we are going to do, quite frankly. If we are going to charge you even one hundred dollars for a resource, we are going to give you a one hundred dollar resource. If we are going to say that it costs X amount to get the work done, you are going to get over that in terms of the quality and the actual performance that we give you. That is just our reputation and we consistently out perform what we say we are going to do.

CEOCFO: *BMA came to our attention because of the GovStar Awards. Would you tell us about that recognition?*

Ms. Russell: That is so nice! Yes! Actually, one of my colleagues nominated us for that. She owns an architectural firm. We have a CEO group together where we discuss CEO issues and so on. Over the course of the last year she has learned about the company and some of the things that we do, not only for our customers, but for our people. She thought that this was a great opportunity for her to nominate us. Therefore, we are really excited! This is our third nomination for a SmartCEO Award. We were actually a BRAVA Awards winner earlier this year and we won a SmartCEO award in 2012. Therefore, I am always very thankful and very grateful when we are nominated. This one is very special because it is GovStar. That means that firm that has risen above the typical government stuff and is really proving itself in the marketplace and growing, despite some of the challenges. You have already mentioned some of the challenges that we are experiencing in the federal space. Therefore, I am very excited!

CEOCFO: *Why choose Business Management Associates?*

Ms. Russell: For many reasons. We do what we say we are going to do for our people and our customers. We consider our consultants and those who work with us as our family, our team. Therefore, we are always trying to determine the great things that we can do for our team. Actually, just yesterday I visited two of our project teams in DC and I handed some BMA Fast Cash awards; just on the spot, because we heard from the customers that these employees have been doing some really great things. Those are the types of things that we integrate into our operation and our organization to show our staff that we are on their side, to show them that they have an advocate and to show them that we really appreciate all of the things that they do. Although we are still living in this sequestration era, we are still providing excellent benefits. We are still paying a large majority of the healthcare costs. We pay some of the dependent costs for healthcare which is really unusual for most firms. We still match on our 401K. Because of that, we have folks who want to stay with us. We have folks who, may have found another opportunity with another company, but then they come back to us because they like to be included as part of the bigger team and the family level of communication that we give our people.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine



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