

Big 4 Drama

Written by Nick Sanders
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So Bob Esernio [passed away](#) last week.

You may not have known Bob; or maybe you did. Bob was one of those guys at the periphery of the well-known “celebrity” government contracting experts. To my knowledge he never authored an article for publication or wrote a book. He rarely (if ever) taught seminars or classes. Bob only had one connection on his LinkedIn profile. Chances are, you would have known Bob only if you were one of his clients or one of his Ernst & Young colleagues.

And that was Bob, basically. A head-down, get-r-done kind of guy: focused on meeting his commitments as an EY Partner. Which is not to say that his career was without drama. He had that in spades.

I first met Bob when I was trying to exit Andersen. Andersen was what they called it then, having recently changed the name from Arthur Andersen and having recently changed the Andersen logo from open doors to a bright orange ball. Was there a correlation between the firm’s branding change and its collapse? I’ll leave that to you to decide. The point here is that Andersen was shutting-down and I was one of about 26,000 people suddenly out of work.

I looked for a new job and EY was on my shortlist. I knew their Government Contracting Services (GCS) Partners—at least by reputation. Lou Rosen was the Head Honcho and I knew him from first-hand experience (as a Fed Pubs instructor) and by reputation (from his service on the CAS Board back when the CAS Board was a force to be reckoned with). I reached out and submitted a resume and—much to my surprise—I was contacted by Bob Esernio and his team. If memory serves I had a phone call or two before I realized that Bob didn’t work with Lou; it was an entirely separate team that was focused on government contractors. I didn’t know what was going on; but I knew that I wanted to work with Lou Rosen (because *Lou*, right?) and not this other guy I had never heard of. I called Deb Nixon and asked about this Esernio guy and I quickly got back on track. I guess it helped that Bob was interested in me; because I suspect that if Bob wanted me, then Lou’s team wanted me

more

—if only to upset Bob. And so I found myself working for Lou Rosen and his established GCS team, and my interaction with Bob from then on was minimal.

When I joined EY I learned that Bob and Lou had had a falling-out. The details were before my

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time, but I gathered that Bob had decided his career path was better served by starting his own, independent, practice. As he departed Lou's team, he took some people with him. If you were there at the time, you had to choose between Bob and Lou, which I suspect would not have been an easy choice to make. Would you stay with the established team of SMEs, who were demanding and somewhat condescending and (quite honestly) more than a little arrogant in their SME-ness? Or would you take a chance on the Young Turk who could be charming and promised frequent team-building dinners at nice (and expensive!) restaurants? People made their choices and as those choices were made, friendships were strained and working relationships were broken.

Later on I made a similar choice, leaving EY in order to (re)start the West Coast Government Contracts practice at PwC. It was a gamble but I wanted to do things my way instead of how the EY Partners wanted to do them. I suppose Bob felt much the same way as he left to start his own practice. As it turns out I was good at many of the right things but not at the politics. It is more important to be good at the politics, as Bob knew. Bob was really very good at the politics and so it was no surprise that he made Partner while I never did.

Politics are important and people (like me) who focus on technical excellence get blind-sided by politics. If you have a choice in life, my advice is to be good at the politics and let the technical stuff take care of itself.

After I left EY (and after certain Partners retired) the two independent practices were force-fit back together and Bob served as the National Practice Director for several years. I suspect it was the fulfillment of his career aspirations. I don't know whether or not he did well at the role, but I'm sure he tried very hard at it. Further, I don't know whether there was drama in the merger but I suspect there was. At the very least, there would be suspicion that "Bob's people" received favorable treatment as a reward for their loyalty to him back in the split. That said, one of "Lou's people" who worked for Bob at that time called him "mentor and friend" so maybe the drama was more in my imagination than anywhere else.

Partners retire at 60 but Bob retired at 55. I wasn't around but I heard there was drama involved. That didn't surprise me. There is usually drama and politics when you have a bunch of smart, ambitious people jockeying for power and money. And make no mistake: that is exactly what you have at a Big 4 professional services firm.

Those firms say that they are inclusive and focused on diversity, but the kind of diversity they

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welcome is not unlimited. If you are in a practice role (as opposed to a support role), it is highly likely that you are well-educated, smart, ambitious, and driven. We're talking "Type A" personality all the way. Everybody is trying to impress and outdo everybody else. Late nights, weekends, extra tasks not only accepted but actually sought out. Learning the metrics that matter and excelling at those metrics. Learning the Partners that matter (which is just about all of them) and excelling at building relationships with them. Taking the required learning classes and making sure your accrued vacation balance is acceptably low while your utilization metrics are acceptably high. Doing whatever it takes because if you don't there are many others who will! It's a system intended to weed out people who don't fit—those who don't have the right "chemistry"—because every year another class of Associates joins the firm, and some of them may make Partner one day if you can't (or won't) do what it takes to make it. How can such an environment be short of drama? It can't. Drama is everywhere.

People are different and they have different skills and different motivators. The Briggs Myers folks claim there are 16 different personality types. I don't know about 16, but I know there is more than one type. But in the world of the Big 4, there really is only one type that succeeds—and that is the type that is driven to succeed.

A long time ago we published [an article](#) discussing the Netflix approach to HR management. It's been called the single most innovative thing to ever come from Silicon Valley. You really ought to review it. Netflix tries to emulate a professional sports team: the company wants superstars at every position. My point is that each position requires a different skillset. It's inherent in the approach. You think of a professional basketball team, you don't think about five shooting guards. There are point guards and shooting guards and forwards and a center. Each position requires different skills.

Hopefully, when you staff a practice or create a project team, you get to spend some time thinking about the skills you will need and how you will source talent to find those required skills. But you should also be thinking about different personality types and who's going to be a leader and who's going to be a member of the supporting cast. If you have too many leaders, things can get confusing. Drama may ensue.

These thoughts, for better or worse, were inspired by Bob Esernio, who passed away at age 57.