
Pat's POV — January 2014

When Meg Whitman Loved Me

No, this is not a tabloid headline. It's a true story, and not a steamy one.

It was more than twenty years ago, long before Meg Whitman became the CEO of Hewlett-Packard, or candidate for governor of California, or CEO of eBay. I was just out of college in my first job as a research analyst for the management consulting firm, Bain & Company, and she was the lead partner on one of the projects I was working on, which made her something of my boss.

As a senior in college, I had decided that management consulting sounded really interesting. Management had always fascinated me, and being a consultant seemed like a wonderful way to help people. It was a perfect fit. So I applied for one of the most coveted jobs available to me and my classmates, and somehow was hired.

After about eighteen months on the job, Meg invited me to her office for a meeting. She said something pretty close to this: "Pat, I think you'd be a really good partner some day, but I don't think you're a great analyst." Meg wasn't one for fluffy conversation or saying things she didn't mean. I knew that she was being sincere about both of her comments, and while I was simultaneously flattered and wounded, I was a lot more wounded. But I had to confront the fact that in the competitive world of big consulting firms, I was not on the fast track, and needed to find a new track.

Looking back and understanding my Myers-Briggs and DiSC profiles, I can see that I was never cut out to be a research analyst (I'm an ENFP and a high I and high D). My attraction to management consulting had to do with the work that partners did, but the only way to rise to that level in a big firm was to be better at quantitative analysis and number crunching than my peers. Meg made clear what I already knew, even if I didn't want to admit it: I wasn't ever going to love or be good at that kind of work.

I won't say that I took the news easily. I certainly didn't stand up and hug Meg (I don't remember her being a big hugger). I probably agreed with her assessment a little sheepishly, and slinked back to my cube to begin pondering the future of my career (which would eventually take a new turn that has been a great blessing in my life). As I look back at that moment today, I realize it may have been the kindest thing anyone did for me in my career.

Let me be clear. I'm sure that Meg didn't particularly enjoy having that conversation with me. But she did it anyway. She was gracious enough, direct, and most important of all, honest. And that's a form of love. Love is not an emotion; it is a verb. What Meg did is take responsibility for helping me, regardless of whether she felt like it or how it would make me feel about her.

More leaders need to understand the power of honest feedback, because they would better serve their organizations and the people who work there. Keeping people in jobs or situations that are not suited to them is almost never an act of kindness, even when intentions are good. In most cases, it only prolongs suffering and prevents the pursuit of a better life. That's not an argument for abruptly dismissing people who need to move on, but rather an invitation to have difficult conversations that give them clarity early and help them begin to take responsibility for their own success.

Ultimately, kind but direct feedback reduces the number of painful and expensive surprises that too often result in lawsuits for companies and personal scars for employees. If this seems like a simple message, that's because it is. Unfortunately, this kind of love is all too rare.

So here's to loving our people enough not just to hug them, but to tell them the kind truth. And here's to Meg (I promise not to hug you).

Yours,