

Pivot Perfect

A Thought Leadership Q&A Series by The Brownstone Group

Amy von Walter: Career Adventurist and Multifaceted Executive

Amy von Walter began her career in government agencies before shifting into retail, healthcare and now consumer products. As Chief Administrative Officer at The Nature's Bounty Co., she is leveraging her collective experiences leading corporate communications and other select functional areas in a wide variety of workplaces including the US Department of Homeland Security, Target, a healthcare system, Best Buy and Toys R Us.

The Brownstone Group's Tim Boerkoel spoke with Amy about her notable interest in taking on challenges and her track record of succeeding in new companies and roles.



Timothy Boerkoel (TB): Amy, you have worked at an incredibly diverse array of businesses. Initially a communications leader, you then grew to manage public affairs, customer care, and now human resources in your role as Chief Administrative Officer at The Nature's Bounty. Did you seek out these opportunities or did they find you?

Amy von Walter (AW): While I would love to say this was part of a "grand plan," admittedly it was not! My career could be summed up in a few ways – it's a combination of luck and hard work and being open to a new challenge. I was also the first person in my family to graduate from college, so I didn't have the pressure to or even know that I should follow a certain career path. In many ways, that has served me quite well, as it has allowed me to take

advantage of opportunities that on paper would never have presented themselves...

To be perfectly candid, I can tell you that each time I've entered into one of these "pivot" opportunities, I've had the normal period of doubt which we all experience when we step out of our comfort zone or area of expertise. But I love a challenge and am a believer that the things that scare you a bit tend to end up being the things most worth doing.

Each of these "pivots" have taught me that while I'll make mistakes, I will also ultimately figure things out. And it's that kind of day-to-day problem solving that gives me the confidence to take on new roles – no matter how unconventional they may seem.

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TB: Landing a new role is one thing but succeeding in it is another. To what do you attribute your accomplishments in new companies and roles?

AW: I ask a *lot* of questions. I'm a curious person by nature so this comes fairly naturally. I also don't worry about asking obvious or "dumb" questions since I'm often in industries or functions that are new to me; getting up to speed requires flexibility, agility and a willingness to do a lot of on-the-job training. I find that peoples' fear of looking stupid often ends up being a barrier to real learning - which is unfortunate and will absolutely slow you down.

I also make sure to have a strong team. In a situation where you are *not* the expert, this becomes even more important. The higher up you go, the less of a subject matter expert you may be, so it's important that you feel comfortable in a player-coach kind of role. Also, I believe in being transparent; admit what you know, and just as importantly what you don't know so that you can make smart, informed decisions. While you will set the tone, strategy and direction for the function, you will also need to rely on and support your team to implement and execute. Finding the right experts to surround yourself with is key.

Third, I embrace ambiguity & trust my gut. Walking into a new environment – whether industry or function – means you have to get comfortable not having all the answers. But you can draw on past experiences to guide your decision making, and I'm a big believer that listening to your gut instinct is important. If something doesn't feel right, it's probably not...

TB: Communications is becoming an increasingly more important part of the C-Suite, brands' core strategies and their potential for success. Given the multi-functional experience you've earned, what are your thoughts on this trend?

AW: I am completely biased but agree and think we should have arrived at this thesis even sooner. What

we've learned in past situations, whether in politics or corporate America (i.e. Enron in the early 2000's; the Volkswagen emissions crisis) a brand is as good as its reputation. In many ways it is the role of the communications team to be the company's conscience. They must understand risk, anticipate consequences (good and bad) and public opinion. In the past, decisions were often made by Legal, Compliance, Finance or other business functions that weren't looking at issues through the same lens a seasoned communications leader would.

The reality is that in today's news cycle and social media world, multiple voices need to be at the leadership table and that includes Communications more than ever. The perspective and value that a Chief Communications Officer offers is why we see more of them reporting directly to the CEO.

TB: At The Nature's Bounty, what has your recent exposure to Human Resources taught you?

AW: I've learned that Human Resources is truly on the front lines of any organization. They are often the first to be called when things go wrong, and they are expected to be the counselor, caretaker, organizer, leader and everything in between. This became even more evident during The Nature's Bounty Co. response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, our HR team was looked upon to provide for both the wellbeing of our 4,000 global colleagues, as well as the culture of the organization – that's a tremendous responsibility!

My other observation is that HR and Corporate Communications struggle with the same challenge, which is being relegated to the "support" function role. While there is no question these functions are enablers of the company, these colleagues are also experts in their own areas; they can provide strategic counsel and advice to leaders who are savvy enough to leverage their talents and insights.

TB: Given the various industries you've been part of, what do you believe are the differences or similarities between consumer and healthcare? And you are now managing a food manufacturing component for the first time too, correct?

AW: First, I believe there are more similarities than differences. Whether you are providing a product like vitamins, or service in the case of healthcare, it is critically important you keep the customer at the center of all you do. If you allow that to be your north star, it will help ensure you remain focused and make good decisions. This will also help you avoid getting distracted by other "shiny new toys" which may be exciting in the short-term, but do not support your overall objectives. If you look at some of the most successful companies, whether Apple or Amazon, they live by this principle every day.

And yes, this is my first foray into the manufacturing industry; though I have had exposure to supply chain in a retail environment, manufacturing was entirely foreign to me. I now have an appreciation for the complexity of our operations as well as the unique challenges associated with this type of environment. As an example, more than half of our colleagues are working in plants which operate 24/7. They have access to shared computers but don't have company email accounts, so supporting and communicating with these colleagues takes greater creativity and more traditional means – like good old-fashioned written materials!

TB: Who are some of your mentors? What did they do that made an impact, and what is your own approach to guiding and leading today?

AW: While I didn't have formal mentors in my career, I can name dozens of people whom I've learned from. My dad taught me the value of hard work from the time I was young, and in high school I had a favorite English teacher who taught me not judge a book by its cover. This was also the teacher who loved to stick his foot out and trip me when I tried to sneak in late to class. I think it was an

intentional lesson in not taking myself too seriously - and to always get back up when you fall down!

Early in my career, I had several female bosses (who remain two of my closest friends) who showed me how to be direct and not take no for an answer. I was fortunate in that by seeing two strong women so successfully navigate in male-dominated fields, I didn't know to be intimidated by it.

Later, I worked with a hospital CEO who made me realize that being my authentic self could actually help me be a more relatable person, and therefore a more successful leader. Our CEO at NBCo., Paul Sturman, leads in a similar fashion and it has had such a positive effect on the culture – and performance – of the organization. Finally, I'd say that my boss at Best Buy, Matt Furman, taught me that being a good leader isn't always about being right; sometimes it's about taking feedback, fair or not, and being willing to adjust your style or approach to help the team.

TB: You've experienced many workplaces - is there a particular type of company that resonates with you? And how do you foster the culture that you value and desire?

AW: I've learned that I am most attracted to the roles that present a challenge. If an organization is looking for someone to maintain the status quo, then I'm not your woman. It's important for me to be in an environment that I can help shape, one where I can make meaningful contributions and grow as both a leader and a human. And I've made a point to talk about this when considering new opportunities.

In terms of building culture, setting the tone and expectations that build an environment of trust and respect are priorities for me. Making sure colleagues can bring their whole self to work each and every day. Asking for transparency and accountability. Providing direct, candid and timely feedback. I aim to foster a culture where colleagues not only know

where they stand but feel they have leaders who care about them.

Often times we spend more time with our coworkers (or at least we used to!) than we do with our own families and friends. As leaders we shouldn't underestimate that. I work hard to listen and embrace opportunities to learn from others. It is my job to take responsibility when things go wrong but also give the team credit when things go right. And finally, I am far from perfect! So, I try to admit my mistakes and apologize when I fall short of the expectations the team has of me.

TB: Lastly, do you have any advice for those looking to take on broader responsibilities? And for those hoping to shift among other industry sectors?

AW: My advice would be to keep in mind that generally there isn't just one way to get from A to B. I talk to so many people who have their entire careers mapped out role by role, company by company. I admire their planning, but when things don't go exactly the way they envisioned it can derail them.

Life (and your career) is not a straight line. I've taken lateral opportunities and even smaller roles as a way to acquire new skills. I've changed industries, geographies and left stability for chaos. When I was

recruited out of Medtronic to do the turnaround at Best Buy, I had several people tell me that I was making a huge mistake. No question it was a risk, but it was one I was willing to take because I knew that no matter what happened that I was going to learn a lot. And it turned out to be one of the best career decisions I ever made. It also reinforced that sometimes you have to trust your gut and not worry about what others say.

I've found that hiring managers can have a bias to only look at people with previous industry experience - i.e. "we're so complex, we need a specialized leader, <insert reason here>". In my opinion, that type of short-term decision making is a mistake; it's how companies become homogenized in their thinking and lose their edge. I believe it has also contributed to the lack of diversity we are now facing in corporate America.

For those folks interested in shifting industries or functions, I encourage you to not accept the "previous experience" premise and to be vocal about your ambitions here. That's easier said than done, but you don't get what you don't ask for. Take the experience you do have and find a way to translate into ways it is relevant in the industry you want to be in. Ask the people in your network for help – whether that's an introduction or a recommendation. And have the confidence in your ability to pivot - if you believe it, others will too!

About The Brownstone Group

The Brownstone Group was launched in 2015 with a mission to offer the most effective executive search, strategic consulting and leadership advisory services. We introduce exceptional talent to brands and their leaders, transforming businesses and careers. Founder Tim Boerkoel possesses more than 25 years of retail, consumer, hospitality and luxury experience, advising and recruiting for startups and global corporations alike in their searches for CEOs, Presidents, Board Members and C-Suite talent. Brownstone, along with its global network of affiliate partners, operates as a true partner to clients ensuring swift yet long-lasting results.

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