

Telecom Triumph: The Ian Collins Story

In January of 2011, Rogers Communications paid \$425 million (in round numbers) to acquire Atria Networks, the company which Ian led as President, together with CEO John Piercy. That transaction closed a significant chapter in Ian's career as a telecom business leader. To get a sense of just how significant it was, we have to wind the clock back about 15 years...

Ian, as President of Fibrewired (the wholly-owned telecom subsidiary of the Hamilton Utilities Corporation) was given a clear and compelling charge by HUC's then CEO, Art Leitch. "Basically, Art told me it was a case of *go big or go home*", says Ian today. At that time, Fibrewired had a handful (literally) of employees and generated less than a half-million in annual revenue. Go big, indeed.

From his experience as a member of the HUC management team, Ian understood the importance of getting his team focused on the things that were truly important to success, getting everyone crystal clear and tightly aligned around what each needed to deliver, and then managing religiously to those commitments.

"You have to imagine the reaction I got from my team when I told them we were going to spend a couple of days together talking about the direction we would take the business and agreeing on what we would aim to accomplish together and the role to be played by each member of the team in making it happen. I mean, these were smart, technically-focused engineers and the like. Their eyes started rolling back into their heads!"

But it worked – and based on the direction they set and using the process they had learned, they grew the business into a local telecom powerhouse. This was a sign of things to come.

Ian left Fibrewired in 2005 to join Toronto Hydro Telecom as Vice President of Operations. The struggling telecom subsidiary, underperforming in every critical area, had been valued the previous year at \$26 million as the Hydro considered its options. Together with new president Dave Dobbin, Ian set to work instilling the same kind of focus and discipline that had delivered great results in Hamilton.

"There was so much that needed fixing, it would have seemed overwhelming to anyone who didn't set clear priorities right up front and then energize and refocus everyone in the organization to get it done." Get it done, indeed. In the space of three short, busy years, THTI shed its underperformer's skin and was purchased by Cogeco in 2009 for \$205 million. Mission accomplished, and a nice little windfall for Toronto Hydro.

With this resounding success under his belt, Ian returned to familiar territory. He joined Atria Networks, a network services provider that had been assembled by Birch Hill Equity Partners out of seven local utility telecom subsidiaries – including Ian's alma mater, Fibrewired Hamilton. Spread across southern Ontario from Ottawa in the east to Kitchener in the west, the new Atria was a patchwork of technologies, systems, business models and cultures. This was a unique challenge in Ian's experience, with a larger and more complex organization than any he had led to that point – but one he knew could be mastered with the proper focus, discipline, process and persistence. Plenty of persistence.

"John (Piercy, CEO) and I knew that it would be critical to our success that we bring people together – not just physically but also in spirit – with common goals, a shared view of what needs to be done, and ultimately one approach to dealing with the business, running our network and serving our customers. This required engaging our leadership team in the process of setting Atria's direction, defining our priorities, establishing clear and undeniable accountability for results, and then cascading that focus and accountability through the entire organization. We had to reach everyone, and do it in a meaningful way, not with posters, slogans and gimmicks."

What they did transformed Atria from a band of loosely affiliated local telecom providers into a dominant regional player – and put the company on Rogers Communications' "Gotta Have It" list.

From a kitchen-table sized business to a \$425 million jewel in Big Red's business telecom crown, in the span of 10 years. *Go big or go home*, indeed.