

A Q&A WITH CAMILLE NICITA

PRESIDENT & CEO, GONGOS, INC.

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Companies today find themselves in a VUCA environment. This dynamic new norm will require B-to-C organizations to rethink their talent as it relates to go-to-market and CRM strategies. To gain competitive advantage, this new agile organization will adopt an “outside in” approach in their people development and management practices, as well as organizational structures. Centered on consumer needs, this new mindset will truly differentiate the 21st Century organization.

WHY IS TALENT THE NEW IMPERATIVE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY ORGANIZATION?

Forward-leaning companies have long known that talent can be a differentiator. What is new today is how we think about, select and align organizational talent to meet the demands of a VUCA world. Acknowledging that it is virtually impossible to predict what future competencies will be important in our rapidly changing environment is a critical mindset shift. Highly sought-after talent will be more apt to continuously learn and embrace pivot strategies. In other words, they will possess a relentless focus on reinventing themselves. The onus on companies is to develop harder-to-discern and broader-reaching competencies such as problem solving, collaboration and adaptability, as talent will need to constantly mirror the evolving marketplace. Successful, more externally focused strategies that take into account consumer empathy will raise a company’s emotional intelligence (EQ) to equal if-not-greater stature to IQ.

WITH SO MUCH SHORT-TERM PRESSURE, ARE COMPANIES FORGETTING CUSTOMER NEEDS AND WANTS AS CORE DRIVERS OF VALUE?

We work with Global 1000 companies in a variety of verticals, and I believe every single one of them claims customer centricity as a main priority, and have for decades. Yet when faced with the tension of urgent-versus-important, urgent wins out most days. Unfortunately, days roll into years, years become decades, and a cycle of short-term focus perpetuates.

Shareholders, Wall Street, governmental regulations, and the global economy are real pressures, and in comparison, customer centricity can unintentionally become idealistic rather than realistic.

A true consumer-centric approach requires us to press the reset button and view the long term and what’s best for consumers as our center of gravity, even if that means sacrificing near-term performance metrics.

Creating a corporate environment in which consumer needs drive strategy requires discipline, focus and a long-term plan. This plan must be rooted in systems, structures and people practices that accentuate empathic human connections, both inside and outside the proverbial walls of an organization. What this means for talent and management practices is that it starts with leaders and a corporate culture that cultivates and rewards our ability to make a positive impact on others – employees and customers.

If we wish to truly understand and advocate for the consumer, we must first model that behavior with the people inside our organizations. This “pay it forward” approach is the first step to replication and a resounding ripple effect on talent retention and consumer loyalty.

VUCA & RESILIENCE – WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THESE TERMS & HOW DOES IT RELATE TO TALENT?

Unlike pure resilience, VUCA may trigger transformation rather than staid maintenance of an original form. A company is a sum of its parts, and must be comprised of individuals who share a collective resilient mindset to harness VUCA opportunities as they help the company evolve into the next best version of itself. If the company remains grounded in its reason for being, core values, and competencies, it will be able to create new forms of value to serve the changing needs of the market.

Short of identifying a plethora of polymaths, companies must not only invest in developing new competencies with existing staff, and re-purpose talent to leverage existing strengths in new value areas, but also jumpstart performance by integrated fresh talent who possess these value-adding skills. A truly resilient company must put priority on this metamorphosis of talent, while also keeping one foot planted firmly on the current economic engine that fuels its future success.

WHAT CHANGES, IF ANY, CAN BE MADE IN THE NEAR TERM TO GET ORGANIZATIONS CLOSER TO THIS MODEL?

To fully embody an “outside in” model, we must rethink the fundamental organizational structure to emulate the consumer, rather than prioritizing operational efficiency. Beyond impacting behavior and workflow, an organization’s structure is a cue to its mindset and priorities. Consumers don’t think or act in silos, yet many organizations function with divisions that lack intra-organizational collaboration and communication to support the cross-sharing and internalization of consumer wisdom. Just as the world is becoming less hierarchical, so too must our organizational structures, processes and systems morph into an interdependent ecosystem with the consumer as the hub.

IF SILOS AND RIGIDITY ARE TO THE RIGHT, AND COLLABORATION & AGILITY ARE TO THE LEFT, HOW WILL ORGANIZATIONS DETERMINE WHERE THEY SHOULD FALL ON THAT SPECTRUM?

Before a company plots its position on this spectrum, it must first be grounded in its core values and core

competencies; these are the non-negotiable tenets mitigating risk while navigating complexity and potential disruption. Then, it becomes about penchant for change, and degree of comfort, with short-term failure in the name of long-term success. Identifying these provides a “circumference of safety” in which to pivot within your areas of strength. Gone are the days of milking a decades-long strategy. Just as the organization needs to be nimble, talent too must get comfortable with experimentation, failure and iteration as the new norm.

THIS MOVEMENT MAY SEEM DAUNTING. HOW CAN COMPANIES REFRAME IT AS AN OPPORTUNITY RATHER THAN A THREAT?

Over 20 years ago, Tom Peters published the book “The Pursuit of Wow! Every Person’s Guide to Topsy Turvy Times.” At the heart of Peters’ book are strategies and tactics for customer centricity in the tumultuous 1990’s. Fast forward two decades, and we find ourselves perplexed over some of the same principles, yet comparatively now at warp speed. Add to that the growing complexity of economic, societal and technological change. One may also argue that customer centricity has taken a few steps back as “big data” threatens to relegate consumers to a data set rather than forging an empathic connection. But opportunity exists for forward-thinking organizations. Yet, we believe this requires flipping the fundamentals and having the courage to live by the mantra: “If the consumer wins, we all win.” Yes, even if it means short-term performance metrics become secondary, while the company recalibrates consumers as its “new north.” If talent, processes, systems and structure are envisioned with the customer as the guide, the organization’s marching orders will be clear and consumer-inspired decision making will become intuitive.

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OFFER A CASE OR STORY THAT YOU THINK ILLUSTRATES A COMPANY THRIVING THROUGH DISRUPTION.

Healthcare is an industry enveloped in disruption due to the Affordable Care Act (ACA). The introduction of it virtually pulled the rug out from underneath many major healthcare providers, as long-maintained strategies become obsolete and competition increases.

A major Michigan healthcare provider is finding opportunity to drive customer centricity amidst this example of VUCA. Once part of a B-to-B marketplace, this provider has shifted quickly to a B-to-C model through the following practices:

Talent acquisition and an influx of experienced business-to-consumer insights professionals hired into the company, placing emphasis on empathic connection with the end consumer. Also, gradual recalibration of the entire employee base to better mirror the consumer base it serves.

Product & service development initiatives leverage a cross-functional team with consumers as the focus.

Team members include representatives from the various stages of the customer journey, including: Customer Experience, Design, Product Development, Insights, Finance, Business Partnerships, and Healthcare Value.

As they manage this transformation, subtle and overt cues have been introduced in the environment as constant reminders that the consumer is their compass.

Simple things from clocks and mouse pads designed to represent consumer needs, to beginning each meeting with a consumer story, or linking the big picture member experience to every product and service design effort.

Introduction of holistic, consumer metrics (combination of data points paired with anecdotal, real-life stories) as input to decision making at all levels of the organization. ■

LEARN MORE**CAMILLE NICITA | President & CEO, Gongos, Inc.**

Joining in the launch of Gongos Research in 1991, Camille's forward-leaning posture is establishing a new north for the Gongos, Inc. enterprise. She continues to consult on high-profile accounts, and as a former consultant to Coca-Cola, NA, she led her team to become their 2010 Knowledge & Insights Partner of the Year. Camille serves as Chairperson of the Advisory Board for Michigan State University's Master of Science in Marketing Research Programme and has contributed to the University of Michigan's Institute for Survey Research. Camille has a BBA (UofM) and MBA (WSU).

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Note: this Q&A is as submitted to Forbes Contributor Christopher P. Skroupa in an effort to curate [Talent Is One Of Your Company's Best Defenses: What You Need to Know](#).