PROFIT and PURPOSE

In Discussion with Willa Black

By: Anne Maggisano & Lisa Ritchie

In November of 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Women of Burgundy hosted a conversation between Cisco Canada's vice-president of corporate affairs, Willa Black, and Burgundy's vice presidents Anne Maggisano and Lisa Ritchie. Captured here are Willa's teachings on corporate social responsibility, and how business can leverage its strength and resources to bring about social change.

Lisa Ritchie (LR): Willa, COVID-19 has affected people in so many ways. How are you doing?

Willa Black (WB): You are very kind to ask, and I certainly appreciate the question. There is the phrase I've heard a few times: Are you working in a pandemic or are you in a pandemic trying to work? We need to remember that people are under new pressures adapting to this new normal. One of the things that is so important is to reach out to each other with empathy.

The answer to your question is that I am doing pretty well. I am one of the lucky ones. We have been able to adapt to remote work at Cisco easily. It is something we have been doing for years and years.

However, I worry about young families that are at home trying to get kids through long days of online learning. I worry about elderly people who are isolated now more than ever. For those of us who are in a good position, we have an obligation to reach out to others and help where we can. I am being very purposeful about doing what I can to make it easier on others.

LR: Cisco is a household name in technology departments around the globe. For those not in the business, please help us understand Cisco's products and services.

WB: Cisco was founded in 1984 by the husband-and-wife team Leonard Bosack and Sandy Lerner. At the time, they were two Stanford University computer scientists who figured out how to make two computers talk to each other. They pioneered two new inventions. One was the LAN, the local area network, which connects computers in one physical location. The other was the router, which directs internet traffic. All internet data, such as the emails that you send or the web pages that you call up, are broken down into billions and billions of little digital packets, and those packets travel across networks. The router's job is to be the traffic controller, to figure out where the packets need to go, and make sure they get there. The LAN and router were amazing innovations.

Today, we manufacture and provide the capability for people and businesses to connect to and derive maximum utility from the internet. This includes wireless technology, data storage, data analytics, video collaboration technologies, software and cybersecurity—anything that makes the network come to life and anything that helps a business or government become digitally enabled.

LR: Given that Cisco is at the forefront of connecting us virtually around the globe, what happened with Cisco's business during the March 2020 COVID-19 lockdowns?

WB: I do not think anybody expected that we would go to bed one night in March and wake up the next morning to an entirely digital world. Across North America at that time, there were just 2 percent of knowledge workers working remotely and that shifted to 70 percent in the space of about a week. In Canada, 40 percent of the total population is now working online. Cisco went from supporting 39 billion Webex sessions daily to 270 billion per day, almost overnight! Webex is Cisco's secure digital platform for virtual meetings and events.

In my day-to-day job I serve the not-for-profit sector and the NGO sector, and we must have had 30 to 100 requests a day. [We were asked] how to digitize, how to move operations online, how to move employees online, how to maintain donor relations or do webinars or deliver the critical frontline services that so many do. It was an extraordinary time and organizations found themselves in a position where they had to respond.

In terms of technology adoption and the impact on our business, we probably achieved in the space of five months what would have otherwise taken five years to achieve.

LR: What are the technology trends that have been accelerated by the pandemic?

WB: We are seeing three trends supported by technology. Number one is remote work. Employees are able to avoid long commutes, commercial real estate costs can be reduced, and, from an intellectual capital standpoint, HR leaders now can tap into talent anywhere in the world. This whole shift is pushing companies to focus more on employee performance and output as opposed to clocking hours in office.

Flexibility is going to be the watch word. We have done some research and found that approximately 25 percent of all Canadian companies are considering some form of work flexibility for their employees, which is very positive. Another 14 percent are considering moving to remote work completely. That represents 40 percent of Canadian businesses, and that is a big shift.

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Number two is mobility in the area of 5G, or fifth-generation wireless networks. 5G will be profoundly transformative. 5G is not only fast – about 12 times faster than what we are experiencing now – but it is also smart. These are intuitive, responsive networks that understand where the traffic is going and when it is going to arrive.

We are living in an increasingly connected world: there are 27.2 billion devices right now accessing the internet, which is 3.7 devices for every person on the planet. The number of devices is going to be 500 billion by 2030, and all of them will be connecting to the internet. The power and intelligence 5G can breathe into this enormous network of devices is going to create a revolution in terms of artificial intelligence and things like autonomous vehicles.

Another important trend is cloud – an internet-based, secure computing storage

solution that allows you to store and access data and programs over the internet instead of via your PC. Traditionally, you would run applications and programs on your physical computer, on your hard drive, but with cloud you can bypass all of that and link directly to the internet.

Anne Maggisano (AM): How has the culture of the technology industry changed since you joined Cisco in 1999?

WB: It was extraordinary to be in Silicon Valley in those very early days. We were selling a lot of routers back then, and Cisco was more of a transactional business with a sales-driven culture. People would say that we were just taking the purchase orders off fax machines and filling them. But there was so much innovation and we were so ahead of the curve that there was an engineering culture too.

In those early years, the market was moving so quickly and the competition was so extraordinary that you never knew from one day to the next what you were going to be dealing with. I loved the excitement of operating in that kind of environment. As we matured, we started to think more strategically, anticipating the market and figuring out what was going to come next. What were our customers' needs? How could we be the best possible advisors and support to our customers? How could we double down on culture and build the kind of organization that we needed for the future? We became more focused on long-term strategies, on attracting, developing and retaining the right people, and on anticipating and shaping markets as opposed to just responding to current demands.

We acquired a lot of companies and brought in many people with different talents. This necessitated a sharp focus on the need to develop a strong, well-articulated culture, and we made a shift to being a purpose-driven organization. We deepened our understanding of technology as a tool that could have enormous transformational impact not only for our customers but also

for the communities that we served around the globe. It is enormously exciting to go to work and have this sense that there is something bigger than you at play. In our CEO Chuck Robbins, we have a leader who is deeply committed to innovation, to our customers, to our people, but also to this sense of global purpose and social purpose.

AM: How do you think about corporate social responsibility and social purpose?

WB: Michael Porter, a Harvard Business School professor, has done some extraordinary work on organizations and social purpose. His view is that the world is full of big problems: water insecurity, food insecurity, poverty, homelessness, lack of education or health-care resources, the list goes on. The way that we have addressed these challenges in the past has traditionally been to turn to governments or the NGO sector or the charitable sector—funded with either tax dollars or philanthropic dollars—and say, "Have at it." That is fine and certainly progress has been made, but the truth of it is that we really have not made as much progress as we need to. As the challenges become more systemic, more global, we must be more effective and focus on how we can achieve scale.

The business sector knows how to drive scale best because it is tied to profit. For example, company ABC develops a widget that becomes very successful and in high demand. So, management decides that they are going to improve their production line and their supply chain to increase volume and efficiency. There may also be room to increase price per widget. All of this will increase profits, and boom, you have successfully achieved scale. So how can that approach be applied to solving social problems?

There has always been this view that doing good and doing business do not necessarily mix. Over the last 10 or 15 years, companies have begun to understand that social impact and driving profit are both possible and are not mutually exclusive. A good example of

this is Unilever. They have a whole product line, Unilever Sustainable Brands, which is extraordinarily profitable—it represented 60 percent of Unilever's revenue in 2018.

AM: How did you develop CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) at Cisco, and specifically your initiative Connected North?

WB: At Cisco, we did not have a CSR function in Canada until about 10 years ago. So we started doing some research to determine a major problem in this country that we could, with our resources, address. It did not take us long to recognize that Indigenous populations face enormous challenges in this country.

In the 1950s and 1960s in Canada, through the "Sixties Scoop," 20,000 children were taken away from their parents. I have a friend in Nunavut, a fantastic lady, who told me the story of the day that the RCMP came to her house. She was 10, her brother was eight, and they came in a red truck and a snowmobile. The parents were beside themselves, as you can only imagine, and the children were loaded up in the truck, taken away to a residential school hundreds of miles away from their family. The loss and suffering had an enormous impact. Imagine that happening to your children – how desperate you would feel. This happened in Canada with thousands

and thousands of children. I think of this as our national shame.

When you visit these communities—and I do not want to re-victimize them—the reality is that they are underserved. Because of the intergenerational trauma, they are dealing with addiction, with the highest youth suicide rate per capita globally. This is inexcusable and should not happen in a country like ours.

I started doing some work with Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), an association for the Inuit peoples of Canada, and I met Mary Simon, who at the time was ITK's leader. I asked, "Mary, what if we could bring technology to address some of the issues in the community? What if we could, for example, bring mental health and wellness services and educational programming to the community, and what if we could do it over video? And then what if we could ensure that you had access to these services, on demand, whenever you needed them?" She participated in a demo, immediately understood the power of this approach and said, "When do we start? I'm all in."

We flew up to Iqaluit with some of our amazing engineers, phoned the satellite provider SSI Micro, and asked them to turn up the dial on the bandwidth. (They did.) We connected a classroom of children via Cisco's Telepresence (infrastructure to provide local and remote participants the experience of being in the same room) and Webex technologies to a Carleton University researcher. She did lab experiments that sizzled, and fizzled and the kids were automatically engaged. We knew we were on to something. I started going up to Iqaluit every two to three weeks, and each time I went the teachers had requests such as: "Can you get us training on fetal alcohol syndrome?" "Can we connect to other schools?" "Can you get us a tour of a museum?" The answer was "Yes, of course."

Getting back to this idea of profit and purpose, a key engineer and I got in touch with the Cisco business unit that manufac-

Top left: Willa Black, Lisa Ritchie and Anne Maggisano in conversation.
Top and bottom: Connected North in action.

tured Telepresence. It was still in the early days of Telepresence, and we said: "Have you done satellite-based Telepresence?" They had not. And we said, "We have a great use case. We are happy to drive it and if it works out, then we can scale and replicate it." And so that is how we really got the support to move ahead, because there was interest from Cisco in this business model.

The first school showed that kids really loved the video and the non-traditional way of learning. We also knew anecdotally that school attendance and engagement with the kids was improving. So, we got involved with the University of Toronto's Advanced Learning Technology Lab and did research on the efficacy of video-based learning in Inuit schools. The results were very compelling: high levels of student engagement, with 83 percent of kids fully engaged during our sessions. These were exceptional results.

We were working in about eight schools when we went back to the good folks at Cisco in California and said, "We believe this is a very compelling use of Cisco technology to address a major social issue in Canada." We then made the decision to spin Connected North out of Cisco and it is now a stand-alone charity. As of last week, we brought our 100th school onto the network. We are active in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, the Yukon, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and British Columbia. We have more demand than we can possibly meet. In 2020 we were named as Humanitarian of the Year by the Canadian Psychological Association for our work on mental health and wellness supports via the programming that we are delivering virtually across the North.

The initiative is community-led in Indigenous communities across the country, and the government and private sector are also involved. Cisco fully donates all the infrastructure for the Connected North operation, but we fundraise the money to pay the content providers. We provide funding for the first three years in the schools to help them to become self-sustaining. The goal is to encourage the schools to budget for the Connected North Program in the same way they would pay for teachers' salaries or for a phone system. It is a good example of a proof of concept that engages our technology, that serves a business purpose for the company and that is also addressing a major social gap in this country. We are seeing extraordinary results.

AM: The work you are doing is very meaningful and impactful for all of us

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in Canada. What drives you personally?

WB: The people of the North are enormously resilient. The friendship and partnership that has been offered to me personally is humbling, and I am honoured to be able to do this work. When I saw what was happening in those schools, I was ashamed to be a Canadian. I thought, we are better than this. We have this enormous depth of resourcing and talent across the private sector and governments and so many incredible foundations that are interested in this work, and it is just a matter of pulling it all together.

At one point in my early years in the North, a little girl came up to me and she said, "Who are you and what are you doing here all the time?" I explained why I was there, and she said: "Well, that is good, but let me tell you something. If you say you are going to do something, you better do it because so many people come up here and they make all these promises, and we never ever see them again." And I thought to myself, "I am not going to be that person."

AM: You have been a leader for women for many years and you still are today. What have you seen in terms of progress for women? What advice do you have?

WB: In 2020, from June to September, 865,000 women dropped out of the workforce in the United States compared to 216,000 men. They dropped out because they were struggling with childcare, eldercare, and they wanted or needed to reduce their work week, but they just could not figure out a way to manage. That worries me hugely. I think we need a major private-sector response.

We have made enormous progress in terms of the number of women on corporate boards. I myself am a supporter of quotas. If we are not targeted in our approach to addressing a gap we are not going to see the kind of progress needed. We need to be far more purposeful about bringing women into the workforce. We need more diverse interview panels. We need to look at our recruiting a lot more aggressively. Once women are in our organizations, we need to double down on their development. Who are the women in the organization that show promise, and potential, and drive and ambition? How do we make sure that folks in decision-making capacities know about them? The simple fact is that having more women in the workplace, embracing that diversity, not only makes for a more dynamic environment but is also simply good business sense. **M**