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Camryn Okere: It needs to be something that isn't emotional, especially when you've worked with people for years, and a lot of it is through mentorship, etc. You can imagine someone who's like a little brother or little sister. You being like, You're leaving this organization. I'm, like, the organization we built together. Like, I'd be in tears, I'd be so upset. But I think one of the biggest things has just been taking the emotion out of it and realizing, you know, this is kind of what your job is, helping train people, letting them show you all the different things that they've learned, get all of these amazing jobs.

Kurt Greenbaum: From Olin Business School at Washington University in St. Louis, I'm Kurt Greenbaum and this is *On Principle*. Regular listeners know what we're about with *On Principle*. We talk about the "Oh, shoot!" moments business leaders confront. How they did it. And what we might learn from the process. And in today's episode, we're meeting a young leader who confronted two "Oh, shoot!" moments in her early career. The first came in the dawning days of the pandemic, and it led to the creation of a nationwide organization for business students. The second, however, was more subtle. Once she built it, could it continue? It's a story of opportunity and an existential challenge. All because a beloved noodle shop in St. Louis closed its doors.

Camryn Okere: My name is Camryn Okere. I am a consultant that works with a variety of different small businesses to help them navigate COVID-19 through digital transformation. And that company is Rem and Company, which is a social impact initiative, founded in April of 2020. And since then we have launched a variety of different corporate and also collegiate and now high school programs centered around social impact, and how do we kind of connect young professionals or experienced ones with different problems in their communities that they are specifically kind of skilled to help support.

Kurt Greenbaum: What did you think your career path was going to be when you started your undergraduate career?

Camryn Okere: Kurt, I feel like it's really interesting to answer this question just because I feel like from the beginning I was the type of person that's always interested in a variety of different things. So there were times when I thought I wanted to be in the entertainment industry. Other times where I was thinking I really wanted to be in tech. And I think what I've kind of seen at the core of everything that I've done so far is I love the opportunity to problem-solve. I love the idea of building a brand, and I love being able to unite people around those two different things and truly build the community. So for me, when I was at WashU, the major was called

Leadership and Strategic Management. Now I believe it's called Organization and Strategic Management. And one of I think the hardest things was that I was so excited to kind of go out in the world and lead. But you graduate and no one's going to have a 22-, 23-year-old leading all kinds of different things. So we had built all these different skill sets, and I realized that if I actually wanted to kind of put that degree to use, etc., I was going to have to really create something of my own. And that's really how Rem and Company came to be. And I think one of the coolest things is because I've never been ... or never been that interested in one industry or really kind of determined to pigeonhole myself to one thing, it's allowed me to really thrive as a consultant just because it's more about the problem that we're solving versus the product, the industry, etc.

Kurt Greenbaum: So let's tie this up with a pretty bow. Rem and Company, as Camryn describes it, is a social impact initiative, but what does that mean? In practice, she's created an organization of student consultants, something like 600 of them, assisted by professional mentors at major global companies. The student consulting teams exist in chapters at more than 40 major universities, and their role is to work with small business owners to save, build and expand their businesses. The businesses, of course, get the help of eager, smart business students who are learning the skills that can help businesses thrive. And the students get resume-building experience they can use to build the next step in their careers. The inspiration for Rem and Company hit Camryn during her final semester as a Washington University undergraduate business student—in April of 2020.

Camryn Okere: I really saw a small business in St. Louis close, and it was one of my favorites. It's Bobo Noodle House. It was right by Kaldi's. Seeing one of those small businesses close and really just being so heartbroken and thinking a lot to myself and ... I'm the type of person that even when Instagram changes a feature I'm DMing customer service: This feature ruined my life. What was the product testing? What's going on? It's embarrassing to say, but I'm 100% that person. So when this business closed, I was immediately reflecting and thinking about why all the reasons that this business closed. And at the end of the day, thinking about it, it was really early on in the pandemic. And it felt like before we had even started this race, it was finished. I was realizing a lot of different issues that these small businesses were struggling with were in terms of digital transformation and also having really a sounding board to be able to run those ideas behind because there were so many layoffs that you were dealing with people that all of a sudden had no one to really talk to and brainstorm.

What is the correct direction of our business? How can we actually think through this together? And people really just needed extra sets of hands at the strategic level. I think the biggest thing about Rem was creating a network in a system that was actually scalable. And that's the thing that I think came quickly after actually starting. The ... the first part, I really thought that I was going to be the one consulting on a variety of those different issues, when if you ask me now, over two and a half years ago, I thought I'd be on every single project. But it was also really cool just to be able

to see the role I actually have in scaling the organization and being able to kind of say, "Yes, I'm good at this," but I'm also so much better at creating these systems that allow us actually to help so many more businesses.

Kurt Greenbaum: The pandemic created the inspiration for Rem and Company, and it probably shouldn't have been a surprise that it took off like a shot. See, for business school students, classwork is their foundation. But real-world experience, internships, well, that's the mother's milk. As Camryn came to the end of her college career, she had all that under her belt already. Internships, classes, experience. After graduating in May of 2020, she started a full-time job at Mastercard. Meanwhile, younger students were seeing companies cancel their internships in the wake of pandemic lockdowns. Rem and Company took off in part because it filled a need for students that need to get some real-world experience, even if they weren't getting paid for it. So yeah, Camryn started her job at Mastercard, but she soon had a chat with her boss. She just couldn't leave her baby behind.

Camryn Okere: And I was telling her I was leaving and she was just like, "So you're leaving your job, which you're succeeding doing to do this unpaid social impact initiative?" That ... there was just like ... she had no way of comprehending it at all. And I was like, Exactly. So this is my two weeks' notice and this is what's happening.

Kurt Greenbaum: So the consulting services that Rem is providing for its clients, those are pro-bono ...

Camryn Okere: Correct.

Kurt Greenbaum: And I mean, I mean, what's simply what's happening is a business is getting the consulting services of what I would assume are fairly green consultants who are college educated and have some of that experience in their background. Meanwhile, they're getting the experience of doing these consulting jobs, that's their or sort of remuneration for the work. But Camryn has to eat and pay her rent. So how does that happen?

Camryn Okere: Definitely. I always knew Rem and Company was not going to be my one situation, and I think with a lot of entrepreneurs that never is the case. I think the coolest thing has been building Rem and Company has allowed me, one, to manage so many different people. I think there's very few people that can say, oh, at 24 I was managing over 800 people daily and I was able to run a variety of different verticals. And I think that's been a really cool opportunity to then work with larger brands just on a one-on-one consulting agreement. So that I think has been something that is really exciting and also just the knowledge that it then brings on how do you build community? And I think that's the biggest thing about Rem, to be honest, is, you've convinced over 800 people to donate hours and hours and hours of work for free. I think there's very few people that could actually go through and say that.

Kurt Greenbaum: So basically, Camryn leveraged her experience launching and running Rem and Company to lock down private consulting gigs on the side. She worked as a freelance creative director for a prepared meal service called RealEats. She worked with some private label suppliers to Walmart on building their digital communities. Stuff like that. It didn't hurt that her parents were in a position to support her with a place to live while she bounced back and forth, applying what she learned in her own gigs to Rem and applying what she learned at Rem to her own gigs.

Camryn Okere: So in terms of really applying that to how do you get employees that you're already, that are already on your payroll to be motivated? How do you build a culture? How do you get people to want to come to work every day? A lot of businesses then really ask me on, we want to build ambassador programs around specific products or there's issues in our organization in terms of how we build teams or how we decrease employee turnover. How can we create systems or build different communities that are actually going to be not only good for a few years, but actually really last? And I think that's been the biggest thing. So I've been so thankful just to then have people see the work that I've done at Rem and allowed me to then go through and consult for their own companies.

Kurt Greenbaum: Now, up to this point, we've been talking mostly about those early months at Rem and Company. Jumping ahead a year or so, as I mentioned, Rem had grown in leaps and bounds. It had all these chapters on campuses around the country. It had student chapter leaders. It had student consultants, hundreds of them. It had students in senior leadership roles. But the key word there is students. And as we all know, students aren't students forever. Was there a moment that you can kind of pinpoint where it clicked in your head that what you've built wasn't sustainable as it was?

Camryn Okere: I think there was, to be honest, multiple points. And one of the biggest things that I think speaks to that is, we're very passionate about evolving. And also I think for us to even say we're problem-solvers, to be a problem-solver, you first have to face problems. And I think that's always something that's really important to acknowledge. Our director of operations, who I had met actually on a WashU study abroad program called ISBA, he went to the University of Florida and also University of Florida and WashU, were some of our first on-campus chapters, which is also super exciting. He had been building Rem and Company with me for about a year, and it had come time for him to actually go and pursue something different. So when he went off to KPMG and wanted to pursue a more formal consulting structure, it was really hard for me just because I have been used to having a partner. As you're growing and as being in a business that now has been around for over two and a half years, things just have to change and whether that's people coming in and out.

And I think one of the biggest things that I've kind of seen is the nature of, especially Rem on Campus, we have students graduating, we're preparing them for all these

different roles. It's kind of like, this is also what you signed up for. It gets harder and harder every year, especially with these different graduations. When I was on those calls and I realized there were more small businesses reaching out to us then I had hours in the day, and it was immediately, this needs to change. We're going to have to start turning people away. And I also realized that I was the bottleneck in that. And I think as a leader, it's also really hard to realize that about yourself, where it's like you want to be doing all these other things. And oftentimes it's like, you know, the organization best. You might be the person that can actually execute this job the best, but it actually is going to prevent the success of your business. One of the biggest things that we've seen is, how do we develop systems that are more built for that change? Just because, if we're constantly having new people come in or people are leaving, we need to know that and prepare for that. So it's never a surprise.

And I think also something for me has been, it needs to be something that isn't emotional. Especially when you've worked with people for years and a lot of it is through mentorship, etc. You can imagine someone who's like a little brother or little sister you being, like, You're leaving this organization. Like the organization we built together. Like I'd be in tears, I'd be so upset. But I think one of the biggest things has just been taking the emotion out of it and realizing this is kind of what your job is: helping train people, letting them show you all the different things that they've learned, getting all of these amazing jobs. And I think also being able to create different opportunities for people to stay involved. So I think the biggest thing is once someone graduates, having them really be involved in the mentoring, coming back, helping advise these different chapters and staying really connected.

Kurt Greenbaum: Camryn's describing some of the steps she and her colleagues had to take. They had to build systems, create a way to pass along institutional knowledge. Draft handbooks. Think about succession planning. All to help Rem and Company continue. It was an internal manifestation of what Rem and Company tried to share with their own small business clients. Camryn recalled a moment of clarity around Rem's need to formalize its training for student consultants. They developed client simulation exercises with their budding consultants. But the real need came into focus inside a New York City park.

Camryn Okere: So it's very funny. I was actually running in between different meetings Friday when I was still in New York and did not time it properly, and I had to sit in a park in New York City and go through a client simulation. And we had a few of them. And the funniest thing is, I pretend to be all these different small business owners. So, you know, one o'clock might be Suzy from Alabama with a restaurant, 1:30 is, you know, Joe from a barbecue place in Tennessee. So I just felt so funny of all the different people that were sitting around me in this park.

Staci Thomas: When you work at Washington University, you get accustomed to seeing student success. Right? And so, you know, you long ago cease to be amazed at students that excel. But I think seeing someone who's 24 years old, who's managing 800 people, who's, who's ... has the ability to problem-solve at

multiple levels and take advantage of an opportunity with an extraordinary adaptability in a high-crisis time. That's something that was that was, that was surprising to me.

Kurt Greenbaum: That's my colleague, Staci Thomas, a professor of practice in management communications at WashU Olin. She's got years of experience in consumer and industrial product marketing communication. And her expertise ranges well outside of communication, which we'll talk about. Plus, two fun facts: She started her career as a Mandarin translator in the US Air Force, and she taught Camryn in class. In what area of academic focus are you ... ?

Staci Thomas: Always communications. A slight focus on management, team development, and with the communication element, it's largely business writing. I do have some focus on technical writing and presentations. Yeah.

Kurt Greenbaum: So I remember when you and I were talking originally about maybe interviewing you for this story, you sort of jumped on it right away. What, what drew you to it?

Staci Thomas: Well, I think there are there are a couple of things. One, I had Camryn in a class. But another thing is, I think, you know, Rem and Company's business story is ... it's a fascinating story, right? That it was all of these elements that came together under the right person at the right time to create something unusual. And I think another thing that really intrigues me about it is this symbiotic relationship between the employee and the client, because they're very much interchangeable. Right? The ... the employee is also the client. And the client also kind of serves as the employee. It's just, it's a lovely dynamic that creates something that's beneficial for everybody in the mix.

Kurt Greenbaum: Now, as I mentioned, Staci had Camryn in class for a semester and the experience stood out for her. As we talked, Staci described sort of a continuum of students that instructors typically see, at least in terms of how they engage with the class. On one end, you have students who are super engaged, sitting in the front row, raising their hand all the time, asking a bunch of questions. On the other end, you find the back-row students who chug away, absorb it all, submit their work and move along.

Staci Thomas: Camryn was really interesting to me because I don't know if I've ever seen a student who was more physically engaged as in leaning in to whatever that lesson was. She wasn't a student that asked a lot of questions. She was a student who listened to every single word that was said. She processed the information, and it was a really beautiful thing to see her work because it was just the very clear and simple execution of everything that she had heard. Right? She just took in information, absorbed it and executed. I would call her an incredibly low-maintenance, high-reward student.

Kurt Greenbaum: You obviously had a chance to listen to my interview with Camryn. I'm just wondering what your impressions were. What are some of the themes that stood out or topics? What ... what is it that you took away?

Staci Thomas: I think some of the things that I that I really took away were, I could see a few, a few different elements. First of all, I saw Olin in the work, right? I saw the social impact. I saw the experiential learning coming to pass. I saw the critical thinking, the problem-solving. I also saw, like I said, I think, you know, here you have a student that's just remarkably adaptable. When COVID hit, you had most people hunker down, they hunkered down and they waited for things to happen. And I think what was really happening maybe in people's minds was this loss of control or they perceived a loss of control. And some people like Camryn, you know, kind of put a stake in the ground and said, No, this is an opportunity. Right? This is a space for me to take control, for me to take ownership and to make something of this opportunity, you know, she saw the gaps. She saw the gaps from the student perspective of, wow, I have all of these people that are losing internships, or they're getting remote internships and they're not getting the experience that they might have otherwise gotten. How do we give them that experience while also doing something better for our communities? And so I think, you know, there were themes of storytelling. Camryn's a fantastic storyteller in that, in that respect, but also in that she understood her own strengths. She has an ability to express those strengths and to help other people understand it. Very empathic storyteller as well. And so I think that comes back to, again, you know, how I, how I just visualized her as this remarkably active listener and executer. She hears it, she sees the problem, she feels the problem with the client or the student, and takes action.

Kurt Greenbaum: As Staci reflected on Camryn's story, she could see evidence of that learning and engagement style we talked about earlier; all the stuff Camryn had learned in business school and at her consulting gigs.

Staci Thomas: Right, it extends into areas of team development. And so, you know, if you think about, say, for example, the development of cross-functional teams, that's about, you know, how do you create a common vision? How do you create cohesion, and how do you get and create expressions of vulnerability so that people feel like they're, they're in a safe space and all of that, all of that kind of comes back to how you use language. And I think too, if you think about management strategy and you say elements such as, say, goal alignment. Again, this is very much about communication. It's not just about establishing the goal, it's about making sure that that vision is aligned, that the ... that the employee or your coworker understands where you're trying to go with it and why it matters, and getting them motivated and on track for that. And there is gap analysis, for example. And you know, so much of gap analysis, we say, OK, you know, maybe it relates to production, maybe it relates to supply.

But gap analysis also really relates to talent. Do you have the resources that you need? And if you do not have the human resources that you need, can you motivate

them to learning so that ... so that you have an employee that's increasing their value to you and you're increase ... likewise increasing your value to that employee? I do use live clients in the course, right? We bring them in, we do some communication problem-solving. They present us with a type of communication challenge. And to bring it back to kind of saying that Camryn I think has a really good handle on storytelling, a big part of that is identifying the gap, right? What is the gap and what is the pain point, and how can you how can you capitalize on that? And I think she could envision both the student and the client as ... as kind of the hero of the story. Right? And then it was, OK, well, what is the journey? What is the, what is the way that we make this connection and create something amazing? I think any company that assumes an employee, a new hire is destined to stay there forever is making a big mistake. Right? And I think that succession planning for ... it should be planned from the minute you onboard an employee, you should be thinking, OK, how do ... how am I going to exit this employee? Right? With an eye on, it would be really great to keep them. And so, you know, I'm starting to see more companies do things like visualizing a growth path, right? Or actually talking to the employee and saying, OK, what is, what does your growth path look like for you? But I'm also seeing a lot of times say, even in a job description, and I think ... I know I've seen Accenture doing this, is, they'll list out the job responsibilities. But at the bottom, they'll say after two to three years, most of the people in this role will move on to pursue an MBA or go into another role in consulting.

And so, you know, I'm seeing a lot of setup for succession at the onboarding process. And I think it's, it's a really important thing to do when you know, statistically speaking, your employees are not going to stick around for more than three to four years. There's a lot of opportunity for her to, to capitalize on the talent as she onboards it to say, OK, you know, if you're coming in, maybe this is what you do for a year. You work, you know, in the, in the weeds, and then the next year we have you actually managing. And then that elevates and continues to elevate. And honestly, it's a big pipeline. She has a huge pipeline. You know, if she's working with, say, 800 people, and let's say it's 600 people, that's a nice little pipeline. But you know, you're going to lose the vast majority of them. And so in my mind, if she's got her eye on five. Five that she says, these are my targets, these are the people that I want to keep, and ... but still continually thinking they're going to leave. How do I, how do I keep them, right? How do I keep them fresh? How do I keep them happy? How do I give them challenges and excitement? It could work.

Kurt Greenbaum: That may lead to my, my next question, which is what you make of Camryn leaving a stable job at Mastercard in order to sort of go both feet in on Rem and Company.

Staci Thomas: I think it's fantastic, right? I don't think that there was a downside on this. For her, it's an opportunity to explore some passions. I think if Mastercard was the passion of what she was, if what she was doing there was the passion, she would have stayed. And so I think it's ... I think it's lovely that she had an opportunity

to do this. And I do hope that it grows in a way that continues to blow my mind, because it really does.

Camryn Okere: I think it's really hard over a podcast to kind of speak about culture, values and kind of building a brand. And I think that's to be honest, this part about Rem that has allowed it to be as successful as it was. I remember I had spoken to one of my mentors, actually, like he wasn't even my direct boss, but she was the president of the organization that I had first ever interned with—Valentino. And when I kind of came to her and I was like, I'm going to start this company Rem and Company, she was like, It's so important that now you actually define the culture, you define what the brand is, etc. And for me, I didn't even really understand how important it was. I was like, We need to start creating systems. We need to get things done. But she was really adamant about our core values, the beliefs and building those from the beginning. So for me, I think that's the part of Rem and Company, it's also the part that I think speaks the most to myself and my own values that I feel like I should be sharing with other people. Just they kind of understand what we've actually built and how special it is. Just because when you go on our website or you even go on our Instagram, it doesn't look like a consulting company. We definitely are not the buttoned-up type, but the thing is that we are so, so, so professional.

But we've also created an internal culture where when I send out like our mass emails, it has TikTok references for our collegiate people, but also really professional things for the executives that we have, etc. So I think even speaking to the core values that we have and the first one really being community. So that means whether you're a junior strategist or one of our executives, not only are you really needed here, yes, we're in a social impact initiative in a pandemic, but you're really wanted here and we want to have that voice really heard. And I think that really goes into every single aspect that we have. And when we also speak back to leadership, we want to empower those younger voices because they come to us with new and exciting, different things that can be working on their campuses or, you know, working with some of our different verticals. So I think that is something that has really, really, really been exciting. And also once I moved to New York and we had so many different people, it's not only people that I love working with, but have now just become really, really, really close friends. And I'm just so thankful for the WashU students, parents, teachers, alumni that have really helped us in this journey. Just because whenever I've had to ask for help, I've received it. And before I'd even asked for it oftentimes I've received it, but I've just been so, so, so thankful just for the opportunity that it's given me. And also, you know, the amazing friends and colleagues I've met along the way.

Kurt Greenbaum: That's it for today's episode of *On Principle*. I've had a few chances to talk to Camryn Okere over the last few years, and I've always found our chats to be inspiring and instructive. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. Thanks also to Staci Thomas for the context and perspective she brought to this story. If you check out the show notes for today's episode, you'll find links to Rem and

Company's website and its social media sites, more background on Camryn and Staci, and a few other resources I'd like to share. You can find that on our website at onprinciplepodcast.com along with all our previous episodes of *On Principle*. If you're a fan of *On Principle*, I hope you'll search for us in your favorite podcasting app and subscribe. Meanwhile, if you have story ideas or feedback, please send an email to Olin podcast at W-U-S-T-L dot E-D-U. That's olinpodcast@wustl.edu.

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