



INNOVATING FROM CRISIS

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Hello and welcome to the Accenture Vaahini Connect podcast. Season One is all about practical ways to be our most innovative selves at work. In each episode, we invite a successful woman to join us and talk about one aspect of innovation. Using practical examples from her own journey. We bring you tangible ideas that help you think afresh, that help you stay innovative, no matter what your work consists of. I'm Padma Priya, an independent journalist and your host of this podcast.

In this episode, we will be talking to Babita Barua on how innovation doesn't always emerge from good times; and in fact, how some of the most innovative ideas have actually stemmed from a crisis. An advertising veteran of 25 years, Babita now leads WPP's GTB India as Managing Partner. From leading beauty and FMCG brands to finance and technology clients, she has helped build creative solutions that shift the needle for the brand and the business. From her many years in creative as well as dynamic industries, she will share her own experiences on dealing with crisis, how she enabled herself and her team to think creatively at such a time, and what we can adopt from that.

So Babita, when there is a major crisis happening or say looming over us, it becomes really hard for us to find a creative or a new solution to solve the problem at hand. Can you share with us any interesting experience in your career where a situation where it went into crisis mode and a solution emerged from that and how that happened?

The crisis was actually you know, it was related to a team structure, which came up as a

solution and not really a brand solution. So, I have two examples. I'll talk about the first example now and allude to the second one as we go along. So, this one was really about one of our very long-standing clients...business partners. And the strength of the relationship itself became a challenge, which is what happens sometimes when you are very trusted, you've created iconic brands, but it's very difficult to change, right; to change things that have led to success and fame. So, the 'ask' really was an evolution of the partnership that we were providing, from a communication agency partner to a holistic communication solution, for example, not just creation of creative assets, but really creating a meaningful idea, a brand idea for the customer, engaging with the customer at very relevant touch points, which called for a very different mix of talent.

What happened was that the crisis really called for a shake-up of something which we thought was a very, very stable relationship. But it was a positive shake-up because it caused us, it led us to introspect and to really look at how we fix the fundamentals and what is required. And what was really required here was a team that was focused on this business growth agenda, very aligned, and very committed to collaborate with expertise within our larger group. So as a result, as an outcome, a team was set up for the first time, it was a dedicated unit on this business. It was cross-functional, it was committed, and it was connected. So, what started off as a crisis, and an agency answering that crisis actually led to a very successful model that we continue with even now on this business.

That was quite interesting. Babita. I mean, there have been instances, I would assume in your professional life, where, you know, a



crisis could have led to some surprising results or surprising solutions. We all face that. Have you ever had such an instance?

Yes, I have. I must admit that the crisis had begun. Let me put it as a challenge, actually, you know, because sometimes when you say crisis, it seems like, you know, very heavy and foreboding, it was a very, very powerful challenge thrown to us. So, this is for Ford India. And the challenge really, in 2016, was on, how do we get back trust? And how do we get back the mojo of the brand, you know, the relationship that consumers had with the brands in India, okay. And it was an India only exercise. Now, that was a very challenging question, and it was a good challenge. It led to our group calling in experts globally, you know, locally within the group, and also outside the group. So, there were a lot of hot houses, there was a segmentation study, which was done. And as a result of it, I must say, what came out was very surprising. The problem that we hit upon, was that there was a huge, huge trust deficit, not just in the category of autos, but in the overall ecosystem in general. At the same time, there were a lot of issues with financial institutions across the world. So, the trust deficit went to institutions that we thought that was stable, and that was no longer stable. And in the auto category, the deficit came from the fact that consumers saw the category as very transactional, you know, you buy a vehicle, and then after that, it's really something which is, you know, when you have a need, you reach out to the business and the business solves it, and you're not even happy sometimes with...are they transparent, is the price correct, etc, etc.

The solution that came out of this was a family-like value and a family-like transaction, which we called feels like family for a change; in Hindi, it's 'family-wali feeling'. And the family-wali feeling was something which defined the way for how India engaged with stakeholders, with prospects, with customers, with dealers, with employees, with partners, with agencies. So, the surprising thing is Padma Priya, we started off as a challenge that was about identifying an issue and coming up with a solution, you know, a brand solution. The solution that finally came on the table because of this and with 18 months of work, honestly, was a business

transformation idea. That is what we call it internally.

Wow, that was quite interesting. Babita as a leader, what was your approach to keeping your team looking forward during these times, because it can become you know, quite overwhelming and the team could get demotivated. So how do you and your team guard against those feelings?

Any change comes with fear, suspicion, anger and distrust, you know, especially when there are people involved. My first example was on restructuring the team and the unit, you know, and that means it's finally about roles, it's about change in what you are doing. It's about managing transitions and it's about managing emotions. And none of this is easy. It needs resilience, it needs a very clear alignment of objectives, you know...why are we doing this? What is really the outcome?

So, three learnings; there are a lot of learnings we all have, you know, we've all learned along the way, but the three that stood out for me in terms of how did we manage all of this crisis situation? Number one, brutal honesty in a trusted partnership; I think any crisis or any solution to resolve a crisis has to come with trust - trust between people who are working on the crisis for a solution, and trust with stakeholders who are part of this, and that only comes with complete transparency. Why I use the word brutal is, sometimes solutions come at the cost of a lot of other things, which are comfortable constants in our lives, you know, and the more we are open, and the more we are transparent, we can really arrive at the crisis solution far more easily.

The second point is an empowered team. No crisis solution can happen only with leadership, or only with one domain or only with one team. It is about taking people along. In the example of restructuring I mentioned, you know, on introspection, I must admit, when I look back, I could have done better at taking people along. We were all aligned, like I told you, you know, the unit that was set up continues till today, it's growing, and it's thriving. But we all have those moments, when you look back and you feel when you have all collaborators together on the



same page fighting for the same war, that's a very different kind of victory. So that's the second learning.

The third is the power of collaboration. Increasingly, especially with technology, digitization, connectivity, all powerful solutions happen when there is collaboration. Now, collaboration has its own issues, because collaboration does mean what happens to our mandate on this business? Will we be seen as seeking partnerships because we are not competent, or we don't have the competencies or the skills? But a really confident partnership knows that collaboration can only bring in the strength of a solution.

Thank you so much for that very insightful and I think very honest, sort of an answer, Babita. When a challenge hits us, we are often tempted to go with short term solutions. But the points you raised earlier do take time. Now, how does one maintain one's own resilience while working on these long-term interventions? Could you tell us about that?

That's a great question. It's always a conflict between the sprint and the marathon. And just the other day, I did a session on being agile, you know, and agile really calls for short term, at the same time being nimble looking at the long run. So yeah, that's always a tussle that you have. And the temptation of jumping quickly to solutions sometimes works against us. The example that I gave you earlier, on the auto brand is a great example of how you withhold that temptation, and to work out a very, very clear process, you know, a very clear role definition, timeline, and milestone checking and reviews so that you move on to the next stage only when you're 100% sure that you've covered everything in stage one or stage two, etc.

That's one. The other is deep understanding of the category, the consumer, because with a deep understanding, you have something which one of my earlier seniors spoke to me once that I've always held close to my heart. And that is supreme confidence as a marketer. Supreme confidence only comes with knowledge, and the resilience to stay on for the long run to come up

with a solution. That is really the impactful solution, and not something which I want to calendar in as something that has been worked out in record time comes with this.

The second is being open to fixing the fundamentals. A lot of times, short term solutions means a very quick fix, you know, and fixing it as we go along the way. In fact, that's the way in which a lot of companies work and there's nothing wrong with that if the nature of the problem is that. But when you talk about a crisis, and a solution, which is really a disruptive solution, fixing fundamentals, going back to the basics, really could be the first step towards a great solution, and a long-term solution.

The third is really about, you know, personal resilience. And this is more from my observation and experience; sometimes we often feel that it is the framework of that project, you know - it is the conversation, discussions, debate, research and work on that project that will see us through it. But really, it is also about some initiatives that an organization takes that helps us build resilience. A very small example that I have is something that we initiated in our organization called 'She Hour', you know - She hour is an hour a month, which is for women in the organization. And the idea is, it is an hour where you drop your designations and you drop your inhibitions and you connect together as women in the team, talking about issues, talking about solutions, we sort of live off each other. We thrive on ideas shared in that team, we also share pain points, you know, and when you talk about the resilience that helps us stay in the game, initiatives like this also go a long way to build that resilience.

Does it mean that it only has to be a woman's group? Absolutely not. But it just means that any initiative that gets people together in an organization builds that camaraderie that teamwork, that power of collaboration that I spoke about, which is very important when it comes to solving a crisis.

Thank you so much. And actually that's a lot for people like, you know, young entrepreneurs like me to learn from in terms of resilience, because



I think that's the part which can get pretty overwhelming.

Yes, yes.

Once the crisis at hand is dealt with what learnings to take for the future, again, you know, it'd be great if you could tell us a story, you know, maybe from a specific situation or any interesting anecdote that you have.

So, one of the things that we have in our organization, it's a value. And it's a value that I love. And it's called 'Curious', you know, the value of curiosity. Now, a lot of times curiosity is seen, as, you know, like a framework, right? It's about knowledge, it's about learning and development, etc. And a part of it is that, but more than that, curiosity is really a mindset, you know. And what it means is, you are not afraid to ask; ask and keep asking and keep learning till you come up with a solution.

A lot of organizations, while they encourage it, are also sometimes not aware of the fact that people sometimes feel that when I ask a question, or when I say I need additional information, or are we doing things right, should we look at XYZ, will it be seen as a personal incompetency? So this value is something which I really cherish, and I drive in the team and wherever I can.

Now the example that I gave you, you know, the auto example - the solution that came up happened, because we all said that, the first step has to be about finding the enemy. And if you look at finding the enemy examples across the world, my favourite example now is that of an OTT brand that says, the enemy of that brand is sleep, because people are watching entertainment consuming content through the night. Now, look at the shift from competition, other OTTs, the big screen cinema, you say that your enemy is sleep. So, the solution that you've come up with is very different, because you have recast the enemy.

In our case, in the auto example, the enemy that we came up with was the trust deficit. And that happened because there was a constant push

to remain curious, constantly to push to say, you know, there are more layers left in the onion, keep unpeeling it, keep unpeeling it till we are sure. And that is something that has really led us to not just this solution, but a lot of others. Now, I'm not saying that the solutions that we've come up with are really the best; we have miles to go, honestly, Padma Priya. But this is one value that has always again helped us achieve a lot of issues when it comes to crisis management.

Yeah. So Babita, in this podcast, we have a segment called Try This At Work. In this segment, we asked you to give us one actionable thing we should try out at work that can help us adopt an innovative mindset at a difficult time. Could you share one such thing with us?

Sure. Padma Priya. It's a very personal thing. But I'm happy to share this. I keep something called an introspection diary. It's a physical diary. Because with the entire day on laptops and mobile phones, I have this need to really have pen and paper. And it's a diary, which every year I change it and I get one with a beautiful cover because it just inspires me at the end of a long and hard day.

Now, the diary, what I do is because it's introspection, I have two columns. One is the good column, which are the highlights of the day, things that I feel very happy about at work (mostly, it's at work, a bit of personal as well, but I try to focus it more on the work part of it). And that part of it that column, which is the good things, is a celebratory moment at night, before I go to bed.

The other column is the not-so-good, things which maybe it was half done, maybe I was not very happy. Maybe it was an emotion. Maybe I was not happy with the conversation I had. And that just helps me think about, what is something that I can do the next day that can set it right. So, what I do with this diary is - I sleep well, because I've celebrated the moment. And the next day before I start work, I refer to it again, look at some of the things which I feel I can do better, and try and do that so that it moves to the good list by the end of the day.



I must say, please don't take it as another task that you have to do. It comes naturally to me, because I've done it for a while now. What I would like to leave you with is, it's always good to write down and think about what happened during the day, and how has it made you feel. That itself helps us adopt a very different mindset, you know, as we go into work the next day.

Thank you for listening to this episode! I hope you learnt as much as I did and remember - curiosity is a useful value to help you grow and learn. Join the Accenture Vaahini Network, a networking forum for women professionals enabled by Accenture, to further enrich you with varied perspectives that it offers. The link to join is in the description of this episode. Also don't forget to send in your feedback & thoughts to us!

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