

SHAMEEN PRASHANTHAM

GORILLAS CAN DANCE

LESSONS FROM MICROSOFT AND OTHER CORPORATIONS ON PARTNERING WITH STARTUPS

ABOUT GORILLAS CAN DANCE

THE “WHY,” “HOW,” AND “WHERE” OF CORPORATE-STARTUP PARTNERING

In *Gorillas Can Dance*, distinguished international business strategy professor and expert Dr. Shameen Prashantham delivers a proven roadmap for large corporations collaborating with startups. Drawing on over a decade of international research, Dr. Prashantham explains the “why,” “how,” and “where” of corporate-startup partnering.

This book explores:

- How to focus on the three pillars of synergy, interface, and exemplar to achieve outstanding results in partnerships

- Why the very thing that attracts large corporations to startups—their significant differences—also makes it difficult to work together
- Where in the world corporations can find ideal startup partnerships and how they can use them as a force for good

Perfect for C-suite executives, managers, business unit heads, and corporate innovation managers, *Gorillas Can Dance* is a must-have resource for business leaders seeking strategic guidance on partnering and collaborating with startups.

PRAISE

“*Gorillas Can Dance* comes at a vital moment in corporate history. With the lifespan of Fortune 100 companies decreasing rapidly, there’s never been a more important time for large organizations to embrace the agile approach of their entrepreneurial disruptors. The great thing is that entrepreneurship is contagious and Professor Prashantham’s insights allow corporates to get close to their startup counterparts.”

—**JEREMY BASSET**, Founder, Unilever Foundry, and CEO, Co-Cubed

“Based on over 15 years of international research, Shameen’s insightful work on partnering between established corporations and startups breaks new ground in identifying the why and how of effective alliance building.”

—**JONATHAN R. WOETZEL**, Director, McKinsey Global Institute

“It’s imperative for large organizations to partner with more nimble startups to help create a better world. This book has great insights on how.”

—**PAUL POLMAN**, former CEO, Unilever

“Many things lead to cultural and institutional change in large multinational organizations. Only a thorough longitudinal study can shed light on the effort required. This book does just that.”

—**DAN’L LEWIN**, Former Corporate VP, Microsoft

“Corporate innovation as we know it is dead. Current corporate innovation is delivered through skunkworks and through learning new dance moves with startups. Shameen has captured the fine details of dancing with gorillas and how to redesign modern large corporations to survive and thrive in this new world.”

—**TZAHY (ZACK) WEISFELD**, Vice President and GM, Ignite: Intel for Startups

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Shameen Prashantham is Professor of International Business & Strategy, and Associate Dean (MBA), at China Europe International Business School (CEIBS) in Shanghai, China. His research focuses on what he calls “dancing with gorillas”—how startups and large multinational corporations partner with each other as a means to improve their prospects of innovation and growth. Spanning a decade-and-a-half, this work has involved conducting fieldwork, teaching executives or giving talks around the world, including in Accra, Bangalore, Beijing, Berlin, Edinburgh, Johannesburg, Lagos, London, Mexico City, Munich, Nairobi, New Delhi, Shanghai, Silicon Valley, Tel Aviv, and Zurich. His current focus is on partnerships that contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

SUMMARY

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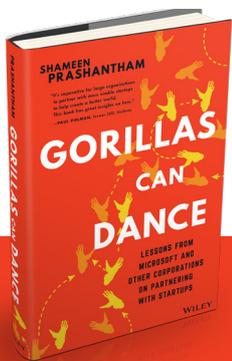
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CONTACT THE AUTHOR

Website: gorillascandance.com

Email: shameen@gorillascandance.com

LinkedIn



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EXCERPTS FROM GORILLAS CAN DANCE

PREFACE

One of the best decisions I've ever made was to muster up the courage to ask the late Professor C. K. Prahalad, a respected strategy professor at Michigan University, a question at the 2006 Academy of Management conference in Atlanta. I explained to him that I had begun researching how startups were partnering with large corporations; I was curious to know if he thought this was a promising phenomenon or just a passing fad. His response was unequivocal: "Startups must learn to dance with the large gorillas."

Thus came the phrase "dancing with gorillas" into my life.

CHAPTER ONE

In fact, one of the reasons why the phrase "dancing with gorillas" seems to have resonated with so many people I have come across is that it seems to connote a sense of danger that startups feel vis-à-vis large corporations—and large corporations, on their part, also have to work hard at overcoming the barriers that exist between them and startups.

CHAPTER TWO

Thus, we are faced with the paradox of asymmetry, a double-edged sword: the very differences between corporations and startups that make it attractive for these companies to work together also make it difficult for them to engage with each other. On the one hand there is the perception of a win-win opportunity for corporations partnering with startups. But on the other, there is the more complicated reality that the sheer asymmetry between corporations and startups makes it difficult for these entities to work together.

CHAPTER FIVE

A global mindset—which involves characteristics such as curiosity, connections, and the competence to deal with different cultural contexts—helps managers recognize the value of partnering with startups across multiple settings. The Microsoft case illustrates that traversing a wide range of geographic locations and tapping startup ecosystems around the world can be highly rewarding—but also demanding in terms of the resources and effort involved.

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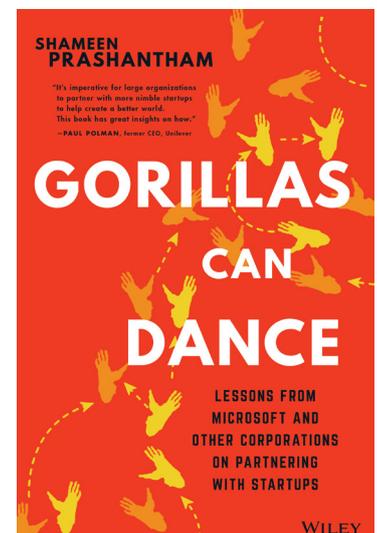
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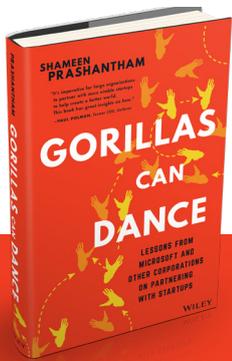
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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. Why is it so important for large corporations to partner with start-ups?

Chapter 1, titled “Why Entrepreneurship Matters for Large Corporations,” deals with the imperative for partnering with startups. The starting point is that corporations need to be entrepreneurial in order to renew themselves in the face of a fast-changing environment. In the face of disruption, some of which may emanate from startups, large corporations have the opportunity to collaborate with startups. There is scope for these very different sets of organizations to combine what each is good at—corporations’ efficient use of existing resources and capabilities with startups’ agile development of new capabilities and ideas—in a way that is consistent with the corporation’s strategic priorities.

2. Partnering can be great, but it isn’t always easy. Some of the challenges faced by corporate-start-up partnerships stem from what you describe in your book as “the paradox of asymmetry.” What is this and how does it affect partnerships?

Chapter 2, titled “Why Partnering with Startups Isn’t Easy,” highlights the challenge in partnering. While there is a potential for a win-win, it is not straightforward for large corporations and startups to work together naturally. There is a “paradox of asymmetry” which refers to this tension: the very differences that make corporates and startups attractive to each other as partners may in fact make it difficult for them to work together; effective startup partnering requires recognizing these asymmetries.

What to do about this? As discussed in Chapter 3, “How to Partner with Startups Systematically,” systematic programmatic interventions can help overcome the sheer asymmetries (which are discussed in Chapter 2) between corporations and startups. The key is to develop a clear partnering process that will make it more likely that corporations and startups can collaborate in a way that realizes the potential of a win-win partnership. And as discussed in Chapter 4, “Building the Capability to Partner with Startups,” corporations need a new partnering capability to refine, replace, and add partnering practices over time. Carving out dedicated teams for startup engagement helps build the capability to repeatedly put in place systematic partnering processes and practices.

3. In your book, you also point to corporate-start-up partnerships as fertile ground for SDG action. Why do you believe these kinds of partnerships are suited to making progress towards these goals?

As noted in Chapter 5, “Partnering with Startups Around the World,” multinational corporations have the prospect of partnering with startups across different locations, ranging from established clusters in the West like Silicon Valley to outlier ecosystems such as Israel in the Middle East and emerging markets, such as China, India, and, increasingly, Africa. Chapter 6, “Partnering with Startups as a Force for Good,” goes on to suggest that in addition to jointly creating economic value, there is scope for corporate-startup partnering to have a social impact. This is particularly so in locations like Kenya, for instance, that have traditionally been underserved but have both a growing appetite for entrepreneurship and many socially relevant problems to solve. From the corporation’s perspective there is scope to not only build goodwill but also, if it takes a long-term view, reap the benefits of development in those regions, as the demand for their services grow—and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals are achieved.