

Northeast Ohio's FASTEST GROWING COMPANIES



Doing good work at core of telos institute's strategy

By Vince Guerrieri

In his previous job in the financial services industry, Rick Simmons used to be the guy who closed the deal.

"I was walking into a lot of rooms with business leaders, and I saw gaps on how to see strategically and embrace changes," Simmons says. "I felt like I needed to come into the room differently.

"When I sat down at the end of a decade, and thought about what I wanted our contribution to be, I wanted it to be more lasting and meaningful than making a wealthy family make more money with their exit from the business."

So in 2006, Rick and his wife Amy founded the telos institute, a consulting firm devoted to training, developing and coaching leaders. Rick is the company's CEO, and Amy is the chief knowledge officer.

"My early work was in training, and oftentimes, training is all about, 'Here's the subject matter. Go do it and everything will be good,'" she says. "In some cases that's the solution. Many, many more times it's quite different than that. Each circumstance is different, each person is different. There has to be a better way of doing this."

And it appears to have worked so far. Last year, telos worked with clients on five different continents, everything from emerging startups to mega-corporations. They're able to do that, Rick says, because the company understands there are some universal core principles, but doesn't yield to

that one-size-fits-all process they'd seen in previous jobs.

"We've positioned ourselves as a leading global consulting firm," he says. "Two or three years in, an accountant asked how we'd scale our growth. I summed it up in three words: Do good work. The lion's share of the growth of the business is rooted in doing good work. The advocacy we get from our customers is what's grown the business."

Rick says telos emphasizes relationships, not transactions, and notes he's developed trust with customers over years at a time.

"Our first entry into a company might be a small piece of work: Coaching, helping a leader transition," he says. "We'll often get a win and the leader will say I want to spread this across the team. Then we're on year two. Then the leadership team says, 'Hey, we want to spread this across the whole company.'"

That's what happened with Smucker's, a fifth-generation company based in Orville, probably best known for its fruit spreads. CEO Mark Smucker said he and other top managers were doing some soul-searching about the corporate culture and started working with telos, first with Smucker's human resources reps and a member of the operations team, and it went so well, the top 50 managers at the company then started receiving telos instruction.

"A lot of the content in that program isn't about performance or performance improvement," Smucker says. "It's about mindfulness: How to manage your interactions with people you deal with daily, how to read micro-



Rick and Amy Simmons

emotions, how to use your empathy to deal with subordinates. It's largely rooted in emotional intelligence."

That's part of the goal of telos, which Simmons says is to "train people as human beings and not just as receptacles of knowledge." Leadership can be a lonely journey, Simmons says, and telos develops and supports people to work in what Simmons calls a VUCA environment: volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.

To Rick, there's a three-step process. The first is developing strategy. "Where do you want to play and how do you want to win?" From there, the company develops its leadership — and it is the company that does it, Rick emphasizes. "We're not coming in with all the answers," he says. "We're coming in to help the customer find its way."

From there, the company reacts to the change that invariably ensues — hopefully for the better. Smucker says one of the things telos does is allows leaders and employees to figure out what they do best, which allows them to perform better and raise the company's fortunes as well.

"We are performance driven," he says. "We are a public company, so we have to perform. Often it feels like the results-driven mentality is at odds with this concept of empathy or mindfulness. What we found, quite frankly, is those two things aren't at odds."

The company's expanded to 11 different areas, with more than 50 people working for it, from independent contractors to about 10 full-time employees. Rick says they develop a critical mass of clients in an area before opening an office, and he's got his sights set on many more locations — but not at the expense of the service he provides.

"We relish the opportunity to take this human element — that's the space we play in — and do it around the world," Rick says. "But fundamentally, it's more important to engage in quality of work than quantity of work. If we got to the point where more work would erode the quality, I'd tap the brakes in a minute."

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