

PEOPLE

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Creative CEO: Shinola's Shannon Washburn on Inspiration, Agility, & Detroit's Can-Do Spirit

Rana Florida



Creative CEO Shannon Washburn
CEO of Shinola, Shannon Washburn. | Courtesy of Shinola

Shinola's first female CEO in a male-dominated auto town, Shannon Washburn, whose earliest goal was to be a college basketball coach, is very much a believer in teams. "Moving into a management role," she says, is "really about the people who are going to get the job done and being present and attentive to your team."

Washburn started out as a retail buyer, then moved into sales, product development, and international brand management. Shinola, a manufacturer and purveyor of hand-crafted watches, leather goods, bikes, and accessories, has been at the forefront of Detroit's brand makeover since its founding in 2011. Washburn joined the company in 2012 and has run it since 2019.

We caught up to discuss her career successes, her tips for building teams, and her vision and values.

Q. What was your biggest failure, and what did you take away from it?

Early in my career, I did not manage people to their strengths, which stifled employee engagement. I learned to shift my management style in order to maximize individual talents, resulting in stronger employee performance and contributions.

Q. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your business and the way you work?

In so many ways. The team has been agile, adaptable, and pivoted daily.

Manufacturing was shut down for several months. As a result, we had to rethink our production planning in order to meet consumer demand leading into our strongest selling period, shifting the size of production runs and inventory needs while remaining efficient. We also implemented a new work schedule that allowed our team members greater flexibility.

Due to the shift in channel sales—in which e-commerce basically doubled its percentage of the total business—we had to very quickly put a manual system in place and manage online fulfillment from our stores. Based on the success of this program, we will be implementing an automated process in 2021 that will maximize inventory management while enhancing customer experience.

Q. What was your first job, and what lessons did you take from it?

I worked at a drive-in restaurant when I was 15. I was amazed at how unprepared the management team was for opening day. That showed me the importance of having strong leadership and a clear plan to be successful in business.

Q. What are your views on remote work? Does it bring out the best or worst of your teams?

I believe our teams have become more adaptive in their work routines by doing things that they previously didn't know were possible. Communication is stronger because there is a need to be more succinct as our time together is limited.

We have seen an increased level of employee engagement and satisfaction with the flexibility of working from home, but I believe interpersonal contact will always be important. It is fundamental to our culture, which requires an inclusive, creative, and focused environment.

Q. Is Detroit's way of doing business different from other cities? In what way?

Detroit is known for its hustle, grit, and determination.
Photographer: Jay Fog | Source: Shutterstock

Detroit is a city known for its grit and determination, and I see its can-do spirit in our team at Shinola every day, especially this past year.

Q. What advice do you have for entrepreneurs starting out today?

Understand who you are and what you want to accomplish. Establish your mission, vision, and your measurements for success. Most importantly, build a strong team around you, as people make the difference.

Q. What creative CEO would you love to have drinks with and why?

I would love to have a cocktail with the co-CEOs of Netflix. I am a huge movie fan and am amazed with the amount of great content they deliver. I am curious how they inspire so much creativity among their teams and attract so much of the best talent in the industry.

Q. Is scaling a business necessary for success? And what's the hardest part of scaling?

Absolutely. In order to support company growth, you must be able to scale and do it profitably. It requires adding resources while at the same time protecting the bottom line. It is critical to create business plans that are achievable with an organizational structure that supports the plan.

Q. What traits do you look for in selecting partners, collaborators, or team members?

Our core values are built around quality, determination, hospitality, humility, and being joyful. These key traits are what I look for when building our team and creating meaningful partnerships.

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— Shannon Washburn

Q. Where do you get your inspiration?

I get my inspiration from the people I work with daily who are accountable and resourceful in building a brand that we all believe in and are proud of.

Q. What stifles your creativity?

Negativity stifles my creativity the most. I am motivated by imagination and positive mindsets. I believe there is a creative solution to any opportunity or problem. You cannot let negativity hinder the creative process.



Rana Florida is the CEO of Creative Class Group. An expert on business and leadership, Rana has written for numerous publications and been featured on programs such as The Today Show and MSNBC's The Cycle. She is also the author of *Upgrade—Taking Your Work and Life From Ordinary to Extraordinary*. (Photo credit: Gabor Jurina)

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