



WIL HIGHLIGHTS for February 28, 2019 Seminar #189

“An Inside Story of Corporate Culture with Leadership Insights from Two Leaders Working Together” featuring Alex Gregory, immediate past Chairman & CEO, YKK Corporation of America and Jessica Cork, VP of Public Relations & Communications, YKK Corp. of America

Summary: Alex and Jessica shared their individual and combined career paths and experiences, before YKK and with YKK. Among many lessons in culture and leadership, they talked extensively about the inspiring philosophy that defines YKK’s unique culture. The “Cycle of Goodness” culture is based on the philosophy of the company’s Japanese founder – “No one prospers without rendering benefit to others.” In addition, they explained how the global company is committed to creating value for their customers, employees and for society. YKK has developed 25 “Fundamental Behaviors” which everyone at YKK is expected to follow or practice in order to bring the Cycle of Goodness culture to life. A wonderful video was shown that illustrated how these behaviors are instilled in employees top to bottom through a focus on one behavior each week in every business unit throughout the company, including North and Central America. Once all 25 behaviors are discussed, the process starts over again. Repetition and consistency are key to sustaining YKK’s culture with existing and new employees.

The second most inspiring model that Alex and Jessica demonstrated was their own supportive interaction and mutual respect for one another. WIL attendees saw clear evidence of how these two leaders – one a male CEO and seasoned executive and the other a younger, very accomplished female professional – have developed both a friendship as well as a sponsor/sponsee (or mentor/mentee) relationship. Each showed deep respect for the other, valued his/her perspective, and together they’ve created a powerful partnership to share the YKK story to audiences around the world. Alex also gave Jessica credit for courageously suggesting that the company modify its philosophy statement to remove the “HE” in the expression. When the leadership in Japan heard Jessica’s suggestion, they immediately accepted it and changed the wording accordingly!

Background – Personal & Professional:

- **Alex Gregory** was born in Eatonton, GA; received an engineering degree from Georgia Tech; and entered the textile industry. In 1973 he joined YKK as a manager of the Weaving Dept. and was the first American YKK employee in Georgia. In 2001 Alex was named president of YKK Corp. of America and in '04, the first non-Japanese group officer of the YKK Corp. From 2008 to 2010, he

also served on YKK Corp.'s board of directors – the first non-Japanese director – and was named chairman in 2011. He retired in 2018.

- Alex has been cited as a “bridge between the Japanese and American communities” in the metro ATL area for the past 4 decades. Some of his contributions include the growth and success of ATL's JapanFest; long-time member of the Japan-America Society of GA, serving as both chairman and chairman-emeritus.
- Awards and recognition include the 2018 CEO Leadership Character Award presented by TLG and the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership; the 2018 Autumn Imperial Decorations Award; Georgia Tech's Engineering Hall of Fame; Life member of the Carter Center's BD of Councilors; and one of only 28 Americans to receive the foreign minister of Japan's Commendation. Other awards include the inaugural Gov. George Busbee Award in 2004; the Mike Mansfield Award in 2012 by the Japan-America Society.
- Alex has also mentored over 50 GT students as well as others from Georgia College.
- **Jessica Kennett Cork** grew up in New Hampshire and developed a love for Japan and the Japanese language at the age of 11. She holds a B.A. in Japanese Language and Literature from the U. of Massachusetts and an M.A. in Advanced Japanese Studies from the U. of Sheffield in the U.K. Jessica is fluent in Japanese with 28 years of experience with Japanese organizations, traveling to 26 countries around the world.
- Previously she worked as the Advisor for Educational and Cultural Affairs at the Consulate General of Japan in ATL and spent 3 years as a Coordinator for International Relations in Hiroshima, Japan. She never expected to work in the corporate world but when she was introduced to and offered a position at YKK by Alex, she knew that was to be her career path. Now six years with YKK, it's very clear that her future is very bright.
- Currently Jessica serves on the boards of The Japan-America Society of GA and the International Charter Academy of GA, among other commitments. All of her four children attend Japanese-English bilingual immersion schools. She remains in high demand sharing the YKK story.

Key Lessons and Take-aways from Attendees:

- YKK's Fundamental Behaviors are available at this link: <https://www.ykkap.com/commercial/company/ykk-fundamental-behaviors/>
- “Core values should come first- top down.”
- “YKK's culture is amazing - Cycle of Goodness + Fundamental Behaviors. Fundamental values are fundamental.”
- “Investing in your people.”
- “It's ok to do things differently. Embrace the change – may not be easy or clear at first, but push on. True culture change comes through change in behavior.”
- “Leaders model values. Behavior modifies culture. Behavior drives the environment & culture – starts at the top.”
- “Consistent/continuous communication (of the behaviors) makes a difference. Repetition and leadership buy-in is key to culture. Daily practice brings values to life.”
- “Courage to speak up in order to effect change.”
- “Giving back to the community.”
- “Leaders walking the walk of their values.”
- “Be one company to your customers.”
- “The importance of respecting your customers.”
- “Sharing personal sacrifices in the short term leads to success for all in the long term.”

- “Can’t create culture, but you can change behaviors.”

Other Advice (especially for Women):

- Jessica Cork: “It’s ok for women’s path to look like a jungle gym versus a ladder.”
- As a female, finding a male mentor/sponsor is a good topic.”