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Leading BY Example

From farm girl to influential business leader, Alison Watkins is encouraging a workplace culture of diversity, transparency, and innovation at Coca-Cola Amatil.

Images by Scott Ehler

Climbing up the corporate ladder was the last thing on Alison Watkins' mind as a teen growing up in rural Tasmania. The CEO of Coca-Cola Amatil (CCA) was quite content to simply marry a farmer and live a life on the land; however, fate had a different idea.

"My mother said to me, 'Why don't you keep your options open, dear,' and those words were very wise words," Alison recalls. "I ended up going to university and doing a commerce degree, then ultimately moving to Sydney and going into a career path that's created many more options for me than I ever would have imagined—

options that I never would have even thought about if it wasn't for that early encouragement."

Today, Alison is a prominent leader in the business world and has a proven track record across a diverse range of industries. She has previously held positions as a non-executive director of ANZ, the chair of Allied Mills Australia, the managing director and CEO of GrainCorp, and the CEO of Berri Limited, before being appointed to the helm of CCA in March 2014.

A mentor and role model to other female executives and women in general, Alison says she received significant guidance of her own while navigating her personal

career path. "When I look back, I've been very fortunate," she says. "There has been absolutely no doubt that I've had a lot of people who have helped me along the way, really opened my eyes to what's possible, and also helped me to gain the confidence that I could actually lead and play a role, learn new things, and aspire to the opportunities that I've been fortunate to be able to go on and be successful in.

"I think it really goes back to my parents; they played a huge role. I grew up on a farm in Tasmania, and my father never treated me any differently than he did his son. From a young age on the farm, I learned to drive in the tractor, was >



working in the shearing shed, and I never had any sort of sense that because I was a girl it wasn't possible for me to do anything.

"I've been fortunate, particularly while I was at McKinsey & Co. through the 90s, to work with some great developers—people who judge their own success by their success in developing other people. I worked with some wonderful leaders who threw me in the deep end but then taught me to swim. They gave me exposure and opened my mind to possibilities that I never otherwise would have even thought of, let alone thought that I was capable of. That was tremendously important.

"Then when I left McKinsey & Co., I joined ANZ. John McFarlane, who was the CEO there, for whom I was fortunate to work, took a huge risk on me by giving me the opportunity to run quite a large



business at ANZ, being responsible for our rural and regional customers in Australia and New Zealand. By giving me that break, that chance to be responsible for a P&L and to learn to actually run a business, it in turn created the other opportunities that I've had."

As a member of Chief Executive Women (CEW), Alison hopes to play a role in helping to change the perceptions of female leadership across the nation. "CEW is celebrating its thirtieth anniversary this year, and I really admire that initial group of women who started the organisation. The Australian business climate, particularly at the leadership levels, was very different back then from what it is today. I think we do need to always reflect on just how far we've come. I think we all feel dissatisfied and can see how much further there is to go, but we have come a long way.

"We have many more women on boards, we have many more women out in management ranks, and our organisations are much more systematically focused right from the top on how to identify and remove those barriers. Often the invisible barriers are the hardest ones to see—the cultural barriers, the norms, and the practices that just build up in organisations and really create gender-neutral organisations,

organisations that are truly inclusive of all forms of diversity. CEW is playing an important role there."

Alison says she is in a fortunate position to be leading CCA, and recognises that it comes with an important responsibility to lead by example and to be a positive role model for others. CCA has three female members on its board of nine, and while Alison acknowledges that the company still has a way to go in terms of gender diversity, she notes that it is making significant progress.

"I think it definitely does start at the top. We're very fortunate to have David Gonski, our chairman, who is a wonderful leader in the Australian business community and has created many opportunities for women on boards and in leadership roles. He has very high expectations, and he is somebody who is such a well-rounded leader. You see that in all aspects of his leadership. So, starting from him, we are actually a company that is really able to place a high importance on diversity. That shows through the composition of our board and then down through the ranks.

"We've still got a long way to go, and diversity is something that we're continuing to push ourselves harder and harder to improve. And it's all forms of diversity. Gender

diversity is very important and is obviously a very visible form of diversity, but there are many other forms, whether it's ethnic diversity, religion, age—all forms of diversity are really important.

"We fundamentally believe that helps us be a stronger company to develop better ideas and to sustain our competitiveness. Ultimately, we're about brands, we're about our consumers, and they come from all walks of life. The more diverse we are, the better able we are to understand, to meet, and to anticipate their needs. It's a really important thing.

"It does, I think, take a lot of relentless drive to continue to create organisations that foster different and effective forms of diversity. We continue to do that through setting targets for ourselves—targets not just for women across the organisation but for women in management roles at different levels of leadership, and also, importantly, women who are in operational and functional roles. We want to see women spread right across the organisation. There are many things that we do every day to continue to strengthen the environment that we have and really build a truly inclusive culture at CCA."

Alison has often spoken of the great support she has had throughout her career from her husband, Rod. She says that responsibilities at home and having a family can sometimes result in women choosing not to pursue their professional goals. However, over the years, she has seen more workplace frameworks being introduced to encourage an increasing number of females in the boardroom, which is a positive thing.

"I think it starts with the fact that we really do need to continue to encourage societal change. The fact is, it's really hard to get 50:50 participation in the workplace unless we've got 50:50 participation at home," she states. "We can't keep just focusing on change in the workplace. Of



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course, that is a really important lever, but we also need to encourage that broader change at home for partners to be playing a greater role in home duties, in raising children, and also in governments, to be creating environments that support and encourage that societal change—for example, through making affordable, good-quality childcare available.

"Workplaces like CCA, and like all of our leading companies, can lead the charge and contribute to the pace of that societal change by really thinking about all the barriers that make it harder for women to participate effectively, particularly as they go through different stages in their life. If you think about it, the structures of work, the five-day week, the 9-to-5 hours, the ability to travel at a moment's notice, those sorts of things were set up for an environment where typically the woman was at home and the man came to work. There were certain expectations and societal norms that made organisations work in that construct.

"Now, of course, we have a very different environment where many families have both partners who are working. We actually have much greater possibilities than

we've ever had, thanks to technology, and we really can break those norms down.

"It is really important that women take accountability, or be a part of this solution as well. Sometimes I think we expect too much of our organisations and expect our organisations to offer up all the solutions. Oftentimes there are many leaders in organisations who really welcome women who put forward solutions because there is no sort of cookie-cutter answer in all of this. Everyone's situation is different, and I think there is an opportunity for women also to be quite proactive in finding those solutions."

The Australian Institute of Company Directors has recommended that 30 per cent of ASX 200 companies should be female. Alison agrees with this sentiment and says that it is an achievable target in the future as long as businesses create their own initiatives, rather than working towards forced quotas imposed by government as seen in other countries around the world.

"I think it's definitely doable," she states. "What it means is that we need to broaden out how we think about the criteria to be a director. >



Often you'll hear people say, 'Oh well, there's no women in my industry; it's really hard to find women; there's no women coming up through the ranks'. But usually that's a function of how we've defined what are the criteria to be a successful director in a particular industry.

"The minute you start putting those narrow bands around the criteria, you limit the pool that you will look in. It is boards, I think, that can definitely solve this

because, at the end of the day, the board should be seeking diverse perspectives and experiences and skills. If you open up the criteria sufficiently, then there are many women in professions, or coming out of functional areas or potentially not-for-profits, who have great breadth of experience and can play a great role.

"In my own experience as a non-executive director, I've been fortunate to have been involved with a couple of top-100 company

boards, and I've realised that if you've got a great chairman who wants to make it work, then they play a really important role in creating an environment where new directors can gain confidence, can contribute, and can see how their skills are valuable, while also getting feedback as well.

"Boards are going through a lot of change, and I think they are becoming a lot more accountable, a lot more performance oriented, and there is more of a conducive environment to grow and develop, rather than being something that gets awarded to you at the end of your career. The expectations are changing in a very positive way and in a way that's very conducive for greater diversity on our boards."

Another priority for Alison in her role with CCA is to place a strong emphasis on having a transparent workplace culture. She sends out weekly blog posts to keep staff up to date on the happenings within the business, and has other initiatives in place in order to be as open and approachable as possible. The benefits of doing this are far reaching and have a direct impact on brand loyalty, productivity, and sales.

"With every organisation I've worked in, I've always wanted to know who the leaders really are and feel that I trust them, that our values are aligned, and that I'm confident in them. I have wanted to think that they know what they're doing, that they're listening, that they have clarity around direction, that they're being realistic with their plans, and that they're creating an exciting environment that I want to be a part of. That's always been really important to me in making a choice about the organisation that I wanted to be in and deciding whether it was just a job or whether it was a really exciting cause that I wanted to be passionate about.

"I think that is actually important to most people, so being in this position that I am now, I'm always



really conscious of the fact that I don't just want to be a faceless name that people don't know or feel confident in. Of course, it's really important that everyone needs to feel very confident in their day-to-day leadership, and in many ways that can be a lot more relevant than who's the CEO; but I do think that I have a really important role to play in creating that overall culture and climate while increasing a really strong sense that we're aligned; that we're all directing our efforts against a very clear, realistic goal; and that we're a great group of people that you would absolutely want to be with and succeed with. It's really about creating that trust and confidence that is so important, and the only way to do it is to be open, to communicate, and to listen. It's a two-way thing for sure."

Innovation is also a key focus and something that CCA has been successful in delivering through the recent release of Coke Life—a naturally sweetened and lower-calorie version of traditional Coca-Cola. Alison says that innovation is the lifeblood of CCA in order for it to stay relevant to customers and strengthen its value

proposition. To drive this innovation, CCA looks to other countries, such as Israel, for examples of innovation and ways to deal with change.

"It's incredibly important for us in Australia to be looking out and learning. Israel, I think, as a country, sets a wonderful example. Compared with a country like Australia where we have many natural resources—and sometimes that makes us a little bit more complacent—Israel, of course, has really had to be very innovative. I think it has done wonderful things, particularly in the area of technology and water where we as a country have learned.

"Israel always seems to be tremendously generous and willing to share its technology and its learning through many missions and the contacts that we have through the Chamber of Commerce with many Israeli companies. It's a very important source of learning for us.

"At CCA, innovation is absolutely fundamental. Our major market is Australia, but we also have other businesses, and innovation is important for us in all our

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divisions as a consumer business. However, nowhere is more important than our flagship Australian business, where it's quite mature—therefore, innovation to be able to drive new sources of value and excitement for consumers as well as drive better productivity outcomes.

"Coke Life, we expect, will continue to strengthen as a proposition over the years to come, with naturally sweetened beverages being a way of reducing calories and energy intake, making sure that we all play our part in achieving a better balance of what we put in our mouths and what we expend. This is so that we can, as a society, address the overall obesity challenge which is definitely one of the big medical trends. Naturally sweetened beverages are a really important solution to that over time."

Through her role with CCA, Alison Watkins is able to use her influence for good. She is passionate about increasing the percentage of female participation at an executive boardroom level, creating a transparent workplace culture with open communication methods, and introducing innovations to re-energise the iconic brand of Coca-Cola and all of its subcategories. While the Australian retail market is in a highly competitive and challenging state, Alison is confident that CCA will continue to achieve success by embracing change and giving its consumers a choice. ●