

## Q&amp;A

# Accounting for Success

Climbing the corporate ladder requires good mentors, communication, and risk-taking, says Kathy Waller '80, '83S (MBA)

Interview by Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

**Kathy Waller** '80, '83S (MBA), a University trustee who became the controller of Coca-Cola last August, has reached a level in the corporate hierarchy at which men vastly outnumber women and in which there are few African Americans. After joining the company in 1987 as a senior accountant, she worked in various roles, including principal accountant for the Northeast Europe/Africa Group, financial services manager for the Africa Group and the Minute Maid Co., and chief of internal audit, before her promotion to controller.

In an edited interview, Waller talks about her experience navigating the hierarchy of one of the world's most recognized global corporations.

## What are some of the most valuable lessons you've learned in your 20-plus-year career in business?

Nobody gets to be senior at an organization by themselves. Everybody gets help of one kind or another—whether you call it a mentor, a sponsor, or whatever you prefer to call it. I tell young people: Talk to people who've done it before you have. Talk to people who can help you navigate and understand how to interpret things that you might not interpret correctly. Sometimes we get upset about things, and we shouldn't. And other times we should. And you don't necessarily know how to make that distinction early on in your career.

## Who have been your mentors?

I believe in having mentors internally and externally. I would say, first of all, my sister, Audrey. She was my first mentor and she's been a consistent mentor throughout my career. She's not an accountant. So she comes at things from a different perspective. But she knows me better than anybody. She can say to me, "that was really stupid," or "why don't you go stick up for yourself." She can tell me things that other people might not be willing to tell me. Another person would be my chief financial officer, Gary Fayard. I got to know him when I first



joined the company and he was a partner at Ernst & Young on the Coke account. He knows me very well, and if I go to him and say, "this really bothered me," he'll say, nine times out of 10: 'OK. I got it. That would bother me too. But you need to get over it, and here's why you need to get over it.' You might not always agree with a mentor. But you need to respond in a way that keeps the lines of communication open.

## There aren't very many women—either white women or women of color—in senior positions in American corporations. Is it because most women have trouble finding good mentors?

Well, I don't think it's a grand conspiracy that's keeping us out. I think there are several factors. Access to information is very important. Men get information in a lot of different ways. They get it on the golf

course, or having drinks after work, or by debriefings in very casual settings. Women don't always have access to those casual settings. It's not necessarily that they aren't wanted, or wouldn't be invited. Sometimes they have to pick up the kids, or sometimes it's just not comfortable for women to go hang out at a bar with the guys. I don't think men think of what they're doing in these settings as mentoring, but it is. And I think that's what women are missing—that network which is outside of the day-to-day work itself. And that's one reason it's so important to make the connection with someone who is then going to be instrumental in helping you succeed.

## Do you think men of color can face a similar kind of exclusion?

Yes, to some extent, although the men still have better access to the informal network than women do.

## Do women face any other barriers?

Yes. I think women are very hard on themselves. I'll give you an example. I was reading some research the other day about men

▲ **IN CONTROL:** "Nobody gets to be senior at an organization by themselves," says Waller, who last year was named controller of Coca-Cola, the latest executive post in her two-decade career with the company.

and women who come out of the same graduate schools with the same type of grades and what happens to them after their first job. And the research suggests that men are further along in their careers than the women, even though they started out as equal. Part of the reason was that the woman was willing to start at an entry level job and the man wasn't; and when they both started at entry level jobs, the men took several jumps, whereas the women took a steady pace up. Why is that? Well, she thought she had to prove that she could do this particular job. So she thought, "OK, I'll start at entry level, I'll work my way up, and I'll prove myself." He said, "I don't need entry level to prove myself. I'm going to jump right in here at a higher level."


#### Would you say you've hesitated to take risks?

Absolutely. I've had the same conversations with myself that a lot of women do. But I've been fortunate enough to have people who have helped me work through my hesitation and go after challenges. I've become aware of negative internal conversations and now I stop them. But if you look back at my career, I, too, started at entry level. And I've worked my way up. I've been at Coca-Cola for 22 years.

#### How can business schools help?

By making sure that women graduates immediately become competitive and don't immediately knock themselves out of the competition. Business schools should encourage women to go for the higher level job versus starting at an entry level.

#### You haven't mentioned the challenge of balancing work and family responsibilities, which is so often assumed to be a reason why women lag in status and pay.

I think this is changing to some extent with more companies offering flexible work arrangements and recognizing the importance of diversity to their success. Younger men are also driving the change. Next-generation men want to be there for their families just as much as women do. Everybody wants to be there for the soccer game. Everybody wants to be there for Little League. So that's going to be interesting to watch. There's a huge generational difference. These men are going to make sacrifices that are going to help men and women. It's going to help level the playing field quite a bit. 

## In the News

### EASTMAN GRADS CLAIM GRAMMYS

Soprano **Renee Fleming** '83E (MM), tenor **Anthony Dean Griffey** '01E (MM), and jazz pianist and composer and arranger **Bill Cunliffe** '81E (MM) were winners at the 52nd annual Grammy Awards in Los Angeles in January. Cunliffe's award—for Best Instrumental Arrangement for his "West Side Story Medley" on *Resonance Big Band Plays Tribute to Oscar Peterson* (Resonance Records)—was his first. Fleming and Griffey, who both have two awards, picked up two more. Fleming won Best Classical Vocal Performance for her album of arias, *Verismo* (Decca), and shared Best Classical Crossover Album, for her role on *Yo-Yo Ma & Friends: Songs of Joy and Peace* (Sony Classical). Griffey shared the Best Classical Album and Best Choral Performance for his role on *Mahler: Symphony No. 8; Adagio From Symphony No. 10* (SFS Media).



**FIRST GRAMMY: Bill Cunliffe '81E (MM) won for Best Instrumental Arrangement.**

### REVEREND PAUL MCDANIEL '59 (MA) APPOINTED TO RIGHTS COMMISSION

**Paul McDaniel** '59 (MA), a community activist and pastor of the Second Missionary Baptist Church in Chattanooga, Tenn., has been appointed by the state's governor to the board of the Tennessee Human Rights Commission. The commission is a state agency charged with investigating and eradicating discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations. The board consists of 15 members, each of whom serves a six-year term.

### CELENA EVANS '96 IS ONE OF ATLANTA BUSINESS CHRONICLE'S '40 UNDER 40'

**Celena Evans** '96 is one of the top 40 business professionals in the Atlanta area under the age of 40. That's according to the *Atlanta Business Chronicle*. Evans, who earned a degree in mechanical engineering at Rochester and a graduate business degree from Emory University, leads a team at the climate-control device company Heatcraft Refrigeration. She is also the vice president of a mentoring and networking group for executive-level women alumni of Emory's Goizueta School of Business and a board member of an organization that teaches high school and college students how to manage their finances.

### ALUMNA AWARDED LARGEST INDIVIDUAL GRANT IN ARIZONA STATE'S HISTORY

**Kimberly Sidora Arcoleo** '06M (PhD), an assistant professor at Arizona State University's College of Nursing and Health Innovation, has been awarded a \$2.5 million grant—the largest individual investigator award in Arizona State's history—by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, part of the National Institutes of Health. Arcoleo will lead an interdisciplinary study on asthma disparities in Latino children, investigating the similarities and differences between Mexican and Puerto Rican families regarding beliefs about asthma and management strategies.

### ROSALYN ENGELMAN '78 (MS) WINS GOLD MEDAL AT FLORENCE EXHIBITION

Exhibiting alongside more than 800 artists from 78 countries at the invitation-only 2009 Biennale Internazionale Dell'Arte Contemporanea di Firenze, New York City artist **Rosalyn Engelman** '78 (MS) was awarded the Lorenzo di Medici "Il Magnifico" Gold Medal for Career Achievement in Art. Held every two years in Florence's 16th-century fortress, Fortezza da Basso, the exhibition is judged by an international panel and sponsored by the Italian government, the United Nations, and various arts and civic organizations. Engelman displayed three paintings: *Fog*, *Emotion*, and *Bal Harbour Sunset*.