



Member Profile

An Interview With: Yukari Inoue

By: Tapkannia Koeun



Yukari is the Managing Director-Japan, Kellogg Company; Non-Executive Director on the Board of JC Comsa Corp.; Non-Executive Director, Suntory Beverage & Food Ltd.; WCD Chapter Co-Chair-Japan

Q1: You've mentioned the "World Expo" held in Osaka, shaped your appreciation for different cultures, people, and places. How has that molded your career today?

Back in 1970, we did not have a chance to see "real foreigners." Foreign culture and lifestyle were only learned through TV dramas. Therefore, I still vividly remember the moment of shaking hands with a companion lady in the Netherlands pavilion.

She was very tall, wore traditional costumes and spoke a very different language. I also remember clearly when I saw a moon rock on display in the United States pavilion, brought back by Apollo 12 astronauts in 1969. Real proof of impossible human being achievement was in front of me.

These experiences simply stimulated my curiosity about larger world territory outside of Japan. These experiences strongly impacted my choices of

schools and careers.

At the time, I was seeking freedom, mobility and challenges. As you know, there will be a "World Expo" in Osaka in 2025. I hope the 2025 Expo will also provide a huge positive impact for children--as it did for me.

Q2: What was the turning point for you, when you realized you wanted to pursue a management role?

The first leadership experience I obtained, was being the president of Student Council at Junior High School. (Luckily, I was in women's school. I ran for it and won. In those days, if you were in co-education, women were expected to assume a vice president position.) I enjoyed it so much, I was able to make my friends' life much better via implementing new programs based on people's feedback.

Therefore, I choose the first company which gave me a fair chance to pursue a management position at Procter & Gamble in Japan. After five years of hard work, I was promoted to Brand Manager. I was responsible for growing the brand and team as if it I was a "mini" president of the company. I really enjoyed the challenging role, so one day I told my General Manager that I was so happy, I would like to stay in the current role forever. Then, my General Manager told me the General Manager position is

10 times more fun than Brand Manager. After hearing this comment, I set my goal toward becoming the General Manger. My General Manager was right.

Serving as General Manager was not always easy, but made me humble and embrace management life.

Q3: What have been the most interesting topics discussed at the Japan chapter meeting?

The Japan chapter has been running monthly learning sessions based on various topics. I would say that members are most excited when we discuss personal experiences and stories at the Board meeting or behind the meeting as an independent or external board member.

Actually, the independent/external board member inclusion has been directed by government mandate since 2013, therefore, it is a relatively new practice in Japan. For independent/external board members, we all would like to increase our knowledge about a company's business and organization. When a company treats external board members as a guest, you could not serve as an effective board member. We exchange tips about how to penetrate

issues and understand people dynamics.

One member shared a story of getting to know people by being involved in a diversity program. Another said she requested a factory tour or sales office visits to get to know people better. This is one of the on-going subject topics we are evolving with each chapter meeting.

Q4: You are currently managing director for the Kellogg Company, a leading global consumer products company. What are the biggest challenges for food manufacturers?

For a developed market, such as Japan, decreasing birth rate and increasing aging population are emerging facts. The number of population will decline, which means the numbers of stomachs will decline. At the same time, people's expectation for food has been shifting.

As one aspect, more people seek out wellness and nutrition, functional foods, and care more about sustainability. As another aspect, a decreased labor market enhances women's participation in the workplace, which requires more convenient meal solutions.

These trends give us a new opportunity for growth through new food creation, package design and service development. This challenge also gives non-traditional food manufacturers a

chance to participate. Traditional food manufacturers need to be aligned with the changes of reality. Along with preemptive changes, including an agile culture, a start-up mindset must evolve with the times.

Q5: Did you face any challenges regarding your former leadership positions as a woman? If so, what did you do to stay motivated?

I have chosen to work for multinational companies that had fair policies for women. So, personally I have never experienced challenges as a woman in my career inside of the company.

Externally, this is a different story. I still remember the first time I attended a Japanese confectionery wholesaler meeting back in 2015, as Representative President of Japan Cadbury (currently Mondelez). Of about 300 participants, there were only two women representatives. I did not know anyone at the time. I tried to talk with someone, but they looked reluctant and showed unpleasant body/ facial expressions. It was very hard. I felt that I was excluded. I realized that people did not want to talk to me. It was a very interesting feeling.

I was thinking for a while and made a hypothesis that they do not like to be seen with, or be talked to by a woman. Particularly, individuals holding senior-level positions. During that meeting, we

each had name cards on our jackets.

So, I started searching for senior professionals to whom I could relate to. I identified one person from a top company in the same district where I grew up.

I approached him with my local accent and introduced myself. To my surprise, this sparked a conversation. He introduced me to another person in the same group, and I felt included--the third time this meeting came around.

I stayed motivated with the promise that all issues have solutions. I believe when we use our intelligence and insight to tackle new challenges, we grow as a smarter and stronger person.

Q6: What is your advice to women who have board aspirations?

My advice is to stay focused and build your credentials in the areas you have passion, until you build a strong profile. Deliver the results beyond expectation. Grow a business and organization.

Acquire industry practice, emerging skills, and network inside and outside of your company. Leave behind something you are proud of and others will admire.

I believe this will act as a basis of being chosen and serving on a board. At the same time, I would suggest that you study what kind of companies/institutes you are interested in serving for. There are many kinds of different roles which require

different types of experience and knowledge as the candidate.

This will help you to decide what kind of career you need to pursue, to qualify as a board member in future. I also strongly suggest that you listen to your company's performance calls with investors.

This is available online for publicly listed companies. I also think it is helpful to become a shareholder of a certain company and attend general shareholder meetings. This experience will help you imagine what kind of questions and what kind of levels of interaction are required to become a board member.

Q7: Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has said, "True reform will not come about unless we have more women becoming leaders in their organizations." Are his "women-economics" policies having the desired impact and are you seeing more women in corporate boardrooms as a result?

Yes, we saw the progress but not sufficient. For example, let's look at results for listed companies during the first section of the Tokyo Stock Exchange. In 2011 prior to the movement, only 3.6% of those companies enrolled at least one

woman on the board. In 2019, 35.8% of those companies have at least one woman on the board--10 times higher.

However, it states that two-thirds of those companies still do not have even one woman on the board. In terms of headcount in 2019, 1,111 women served on the boards of those companies. This is 50% higher than 2018.

Although, in terms of the percentage of total board members, women account for only 5.7%. This is quite the gap, versus a 10% goal in 2020. It's safe to say that more work needs to be done.

Q8: In your opinion, what is the most pressing issue impacting corporate governance today?

SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) is one of the emerging subject topics at the board meetings. We include those topics in the monthly learning sessions.

As a board, we prepare ourselves to ask the right questions concerning the goals we care about, the ability to win, and making the right choice in strategy development. When we think about choices, we balance providing good for employees, consumers, our community and investors.

We also need to build capability to deliver strong and effective communication of our choices/plans towards investors and shareholders to obtain their interests/support to the company.

Q9: Do you have any reading recommendations, for personal enjoyment or professional use?

I like novels by Kazuo Ishiguro. I have compassion with the main character, (the butler) in "The Remains of the Day." I also thought deeply about human beings through "Never Let Me Go."

In terms of professional readings, I recommend "Tuesday with Morrie." This book was given to me by one of my colleagues when I reviewed my work purpose and leadership style.

This book helped me to move from running a company using my head, to running company using my heart. Also, this book encouraged me to expand the scope of work with a larger emphasis on life.

Q10: What does being a WCD member mean to you?

In two aspects, I really feel engaged with WCD and other WCD members. First, I have a strong passion for women's enhancement, particularly in the corporate world, where we can make a positive impact to society, community and people.

The company board has a very important responsibility to guide the company either onto positive values or negative values.

As more women serve as board members, we can deliver more balanced decisions when we decide which direction we should move. In this aspect, I feel that being a WCD member means I am better-equipped to contribute to society.

Another aspect is friendship/a sense of community. Given we share the same purpose and values, I feel so happy to be with other WCD members. We discuss together, learn together and grow together. And most importantly, we have fun together. From this aspect, being a WCD member means family to me.