

WOMEN IN BUSINESS

“We’re simply better together”

Stephanie Jackson, Kimberly Paxton-Hagner and **Melissa Paxton Steiner** are the third-generation owners of Kwik Lok. They bring diverse backgrounds to the company they chose to enter into six years ago, and the combined force of confidence, resourcefulness and authenticity.



+ **Mihu:** Together, you started working in the company when you inherited it; you are also the first women in leadership roles at Kwik Lok. As third-generation owners of Kwik Lok Corporation, how are you building on the family legacy?

Stephanie Jackson: We were not groomed in the family business. While other families may be joining from their late teens or early adulthood, that was not our journey. Six years ago, when our father passed, this opportunity literally landed on our laps. As sisters, it was important to us to consider how we would make an impact and bring value when we were not going to be working in the daily operations. When we started, we had someone working with our family business who presented the opportunity to us and at the same time gave us the confidence that we could do this. The process also involved connecting with other family businesses running their companies into their third, fourth or fifth generations. We are very engaged owners and are trying to do a great job leading. In this context, the first step was to acknowledge that we could do it. With the three of us having worked in different arenas, we brought together a variety of leadership styles, which combine well as we deeply respect our

differences. We genuinely get along well – that is key since it’s not a given for every family. We feel very blessed that we respect each other and our unique styles.

Mihu: What would be the essence of your individual leadership styles?

Kimberly Paxton-Hagner: Because we’ve been sisters longer than we’ve been in business together, it was easy for us to fall back on our regular ways of communicating with each other. We realized that we needed to create space for us to communicate as owners and bring that information to the Board. That’s why we developed the owners’ council that helped us formalize our decisions as owners giving us an avenue with the Board, to promote further discussions with them. For my leadership style, I am more of a thinker, I like to reflect before I act. I’ve always been the bookworm of the family; as an avid reader, there is a lot of information I like to access before I make a decision, and that’s one of the things that we help each other with as sisters: we are always learning and bringing what we are excited about and what we learn back to each other as a way of balancing each other up and gaining new insights.

I found going back into school helpful, with courses such as Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management which has a family business focus. There, I also learned from the experiences of other business owners. This matches my leadership style closely. I am a great listener, too; this is something that I found helpful to bring to the Boardroom, because you don't want to be the loudest voice in the room when you are sitting in the Board chair, especially as an owner.

Melissa Paxton Steiner: I would say I am still in the learning process of my leadership style. I joined the Board and became a part of the business in 2018, so it's been a whirlwind of information. I am more comfortable being behind the scenes – I listen very well and prefer not to add much until I am confident that I have all the information I need and then I feel I can make a meaningful contribution. I count on my sisters a lot to help me through this process and give me the confidence to stand up and voice what I think, even if I disagree – which is OK to do. It's a work in progress.

Stephanie Jackson: May we all continue with the beginner's mindset! I would say that I am the loudest of the sisters in my style (laughs). I am not afraid to ask questions, I think that is one of my superpowers - and I'm curious. My style stems from knowing I don't know all the answers, so I ask a lot of questions and then rely on my support team. It takes a village! I truly believe this, whether it's in parenting, or in running a business. I certainly rely on my support system, which is why I surround myself with exciting, intelligent, engaging, want-to-make-a-difference kind of people. I look to them and bring all that back to my sisters and the company.

Mihu: From your experience and from interacting with other family business owners, what values do you consider to be at the core of a family business?

Kimberly Paxton-Hagner: The main thing I learned is that what we (and family businesses, in general) bring our deep connection to the family legacy as well as the vision and the values of the family. It's why family businesses generally do so well. Knowing that we hold a North Star for our business is what keeps us focused on the direction we want to go as we go forward, while also engaging people's hearts in the process. That is at the core of the impact we can have as owners of a family business. It is something we hear echoed over and over again, from other family business owners. It validates that our work in this family together, as a business, has an innate value that we need to share with those interacting with our business. This is how we will drive our vision forward for generations.

Mihu: How do you view taking on a top management role in the industry as women?

Stephanie Jackson: Going back to our father and grandfather, what they excelled in was making a reliable product, having integrity, treating their people well – with dignity and respect. That was the groundwork of our legacy. With women now leading this legacy, our focus has been on the

impact, and the experience our employees are having. Women are inclusive; we are very community-based, very world-based and all-around grounded. Those are important values that women leaders bring. This aspect can get lost sometimes; that's why we need everybody at the table, for a fuller, robust, diverse and inclusive way of doing business. As women owners, we are adding that as a layer on top of a great foundation.

Mihu: What is your approach to innovation and sustainability, and how do you feel these areas reflect on food safety?

Kimberly Paxton-Hagner: Innovation is the reason why we are even here talking today: it's because of the innovation that came before us, through our grandfather's work, on which our father built on for so many years. Innovation thrives in an environment where trust is key; in other words, where people know that they can lean on each other, everybody has the same intent, and we are all trying to accomplish a big goal together. That is why we are focused on building an environment that supports employees to bring up ideas, to make mistakes and learn from them, and to always think of ways to link arms with others and contribute to even bigger work. Sustainability is this kind of 'big work', and creates an uncertain path for the future, too. The only way we will get there is together, so building partnerships, and getting people excited about working with Kwik Lok, showing them that we are always going to lead with integrity, follow the science, learn from other people and build on each other's experiences to come up with the next best solution – and then, keep going for generations.

Mihu: What makes people excited to work with Kwik Lok?

Stephanie Jackson: I think when they find out we have a big vision on making this world better, that's exciting. Everybody relates to this goal. When people know that they are doing meaningful work and innovating products and processes that make people's lives better, it engages them. We have an atmosphere of collaboration as well as respect and dignity. Everyone wants to lean into working with people who truly see you and value you, and I think we bring that.

Mihu: How are responsible labor practices aligned globally at Kwik Lok?

Stephanie Jackson: As I said earlier, treating people with dignity and respect is at the core of our business, therefore, we established a code of conduct within Kwik Lok that says we are 100% free of human trafficking. We now want to promote it and 'walk our talk' with all the people we work within our supply chain. If we want respect and dignity within our own company, we need to show that out into the world. The people we work with, our partners and our supply chain are where we can make those efforts. I can say proudly that we are 90% free of human trafficking in our supply chain. That is exciting and fills us with pride.



Women include people; we are very community-based, very world-based and all-around grounded

Stephanie Jackson

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Mihu: Moving on from the inspirational to the challenging, what issues have you encountered professionally as women?

Kimberly Paxton-Hagner: In my past work experience, one recurring challenge was that women in leadership roles or managing departments found themselves skipped over for pay increases or promotions. The reason commonly given by the management was that the men were the providers for their families and needed the pay increase more. Every single one of these women was also a provider to their families, too, but they were held back based on this misconception from the male owner who viewed women as needing the money, instead of earning it, even though they added the most value to the corporation in their position. That is a challenge oftentimes women face.

Mihu: Pandemic measures brought challenges of their own, especially for women who have been working from home full-time while also 'in charge' of household work and childcare. What support system have you had in place in the past year to navigate the new day-to-day work challenges?

Kimberly Paxton-Hagner: The first thing we did, which I love, is to check in with our people. We didn't just tell them what they needed, we asked instead, and learned everyone's unique situation at home and how to support them. Some people might be the primary caretakers of children in their home, but they are also most likely to be taking care of elderly parents, who are often susceptible at this time. We provided remote work solutions wherever we could, for people who needed that extra layer of safety for their families. We also made sure we were providing benefits including mental health support and reminded people they could lean on the company during this time.

Mihu: How do you see a work routine stabilizing after a year and a half?

Stephanie Jackson: During this pandemic we realized that remote work is valued by our employees and we are now establishing a remote-work policy, not just during this time but ongoing. We have found that it opens up our ability to access more talent and can often bring higher levels of productivity. It's a win-win for everybody. We've hired several people during the pandemic and learned we can have a combination of employees working remotely and from the office. It was exciting for the employees to see that they could still do their work without having to come into the office five days a week. This helped out many people who had to stay home and cover homeschooling or keep children motivated in school.

Mihu: How does having the support and solidarity as three sisters help you coordinate the management of the company?

Melissa Paxton Steiner: I wouldn't even be a part of this family business were it not for my sisters... They give me the strength to step out of my comfort zone and do things that I haven't been trained for - to take on some of the challenges that I've been given.

Stephanie Jackson: I would love to add to this point, that my sisters and I remind each other that our past work experiences have set us up to be able to do what we are doing now, and that's the solidarity we have. We, as women especially, can forget our other skills and experiences are assets. I remember recently reminding my sister Kim that her job as a graphic designer and holding the position of chairwoman of a nonprofit has prepared her to fulfill her role as chair of the Board of our company, for example. We all bring our past skills that allow us to be the great leaders that we are now.

Mihu: What are some of the difficult decisions that you feel women have to make professionally in the industry, in your experience?

Stephanie Jackson: It's not necessarily a decision, but more of an situation: the lack of representation is a challenge. I believe if you can't see it, how do you aim for it? One of the responsibilities that my sisters and I feel is to provide more opportunities for more women to be represented in all different areas of our company, from engineering to C-suite leadership and being on our Board. That is one of our biggest challenges in the manufacturing industry. We can work to uplift more representation, which will make great inroads.

Mihu: How can women's representation in the industry be supported in order to increase?

Kimberly Paxton-Hagner: One of the ways is the work you are doing right here: help make women more visible. We know that women are out there leading, and we can see what we are able to do. It is not only important to see women in this industry for valuable takeaways, but also how women leaders, in general, are accomplishing their goals. With the Olympics, we saw a viral video of a little girl watching and cheering on a woman in a weightlifting competition. It just reminded me of how powerful it is for us to see somebody who looks like us do that work. We also need to consider that, on top of the challenges we face as women, there is another unique layer of difficulties for black, indigenous and other women of color. We can lift other women up who are dealing with these various levels of difficulties in their professional life, by making sure there is visibility for them, by passing the mic and sitting at the table with women with very different backgrounds and experiences from ours. The narrative needs to be about how we can make room, provide support, get young women into the pipeline so that they can stand up for the next generation as well.

Mihu: What are some of the decisions you could share that you made not just as a professional, but also which you consider are the type of decision that should come from a woman?

Stephanie Jackson: I feel women can get a bad rap because we lead with our hearts and that can be frowned upon in big business. One of the reasons why we were not groomed for the company is that our father, through no fault of his own but sharing the view of the times, saw women as too emotional for business, and our minds were not made for big business. What women bring is heart leadership and we can all now see that the world needs that. We are at a time of crisis in leadership, and I believe that many countries outside of the U.S., have begun to uplift women more and acknowledge the value of this kind of leadership. We are trailing behind in various things, from sustainability issues to women's heart-led leadership. This kind of leadership is what we want to focus on.

Kimberly Paxton-Hagner: As a reminder, we started doing CSR right away; it was high up on our list of things

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Mihu: From this perspective, what other changes did the leadership transition entail including the introduction of CSR?

Kimberly Paxton-Hagner: We talked about what women's leadership brings to the table; before we took over, the focus was more on ways to expand and preserve the business, and how to maintain profitability at a certain level. When we came in, we realized that the key to doing all that work is focusing on people. Our new priorities were to make sure that people feel supported, that they come to work, perform and feel good about it; and then go home and enjoy their life without having to worry about work. We also wanted to make sure that everybody is communicating, that we are sharing best practices. Rather than thinking

that every plant can take care of itself, we learned that sometimes different plants can make the same mistakes, and it's important to share this knowledge, too, so we can learn from each other, as well as sharing the wins. Innovations were developed in Australia, for instance, of which we didn't take advantage of in

Yakima until we started talking to each other. Human beings like to collaborate, in

general, but women especially love to collaborate because we see an immediate value to it. We put in place the teams that would do this right away. This is the shift we introduced, built on open communication, a trend spearheaded by our current CEO, Don Carrell. We pushed it as leaders of the family and he championed it, opened up his door for people and set the tone for the rest of the organization.

Mihu: What would you consider the most meaningful decision you have made and how is it reflected in your work?

Stephanie Jackson: I have two: the first is making the decision to continue our family legacy. It was not a decision that we took lightly, and we chose to take on the opportunity, instead of selling the business. The second meaningful decision is bringing Corporate Social Responsibility to the forefront immediately as we entered as leaders. This needed to be talked about and brought in focus, and not just in the form of a report where you check the box. We needed to integrate these concepts into everything we did. Mind you – we didn't exactly know how to do it, at first! We asked a lot of questions and brought on a lot of smart, wonderful people to further our vision.

Mihu: What CSR guidelines are you prioritizing?

Kimberly Paxton-Hagner: A progress that I am proud about has to do with sustainability as a part of our CSR work. Some employees might have thought this was more of a task

for the engineers or the innovation committees, but we are very happy to see that we have woven it into our business plans and introduced key initiatives that all employees are working on accomplishing, through their managers. In this way, they were able to see sustainability as a companywide goal. We had a challenge brought from a customer: how could we print on a lock without compromising on sustainability? The way we normally would have done it would not have allowed for the lock to be reused, or pieces from it, in order to make it more sustainable. We got the printing done at a later stage of the process instead and kept sustainability a part of the solution provided. I feel very proud knowing that this message has been pushed out and that CSR is how we've accomplished that.

Stephanie Jackson: In our listening sessions with our employees, we've learned that they've been practicing sustainability back home in their own lives, and it's reflected in how they are now looking at waste in terms of reusing and recycling it. That was exciting to hear they were thinking about this topic outside the walls of Kwik Lok.

Mihu: On this note, a concept you've referred to in the past is 'doing well by doing good'. What is its significance at Kwik Lok?

Stephanie Jackson: We believe that providing a great culture for employees is the core of doing well. Data shows that, when employees feel trusted and supported, they literally outperform businesses that are only focused on the bottom line. We know that we have to be profitable and, at the same time, it is important to us to do good by our employees, communities and our planet. We realize doing well is at the center, but we reach it from another angle, working with partners who believe in the same vision as we do. One of our big pillars is opportunity. Advancing the quality of opportunity to all of our employees, upscaling them and showing them they have a stable future. This provides the certainty that human beings need to do good work. On top of that, we also want to have fun! You're not just coming in and punching a clock at Kwik Lok, we want to make sure that you feel engaged. People who have recently joined our company or who have just passed through the interviewing process have said that they felt very welcomed. People are genuinely smiling and happy to be at work. People feel that Kwik Lok has a nice, inviting atmosphere, which makes them feel excited to be here. These are unsolicited comments that make us proud of what we are focusing on.

Kimberly Paxton-Hagner: In the recent listening, employees mention feeling good about working for a company that cares about the environment. People are engaged on another level when they are connected to the broader work we do as a group and the bigger impact we have, through things that mean something to them. While doing this, they get to talk about what they do at work, volunteer time off, get paid to do work in their community and can join the sustainability work that we are doing with our innovations.



Kimberly Paxton-Hagner

Once your heart is involved in what you are doing every day, it's amazing what magic that brings.

Mihu: These also add to the answers to my earlier question and show what is exciting about working at Kwik Lok. You mentioned listening sessions with your employees, how are they organized?



Stephanie Jackson

Stephanie Jackson: We are working with our leadership to share our vision and mission within the company and are talking with the employees to see their perspectives on what we thought were great concepts.

We recently did this and the results have just come back. We were pleasantly surprised to learn that people connected to the concepts of what we were saying. Was there room for more context to some of the things we have in mind? Yes. These sessions have been hugely valuable to see where we need to connect the dots, so every employee sees themselves in our vision. That is our intent, to have everybody see their part in the equation of pushing our vision and mission forward, not just engineers or those at management level.

Mihu: How often are these listening sessions held?

Kimberly Paxton-Hagner: We've had smaller ones before, but this has been the first time we've had a bigger ask, to reach employees across the globe and in all the different departments (in its six factories, Kwik Lok currently employs over 330 people, eds.) and to lift a variety of voices. We are considering how often to repeat them, as we are also doing poll surveys with fewer questions, to hear from the employees regularly so that we make sure we pay attention to the things that matter to them. Many companies do this, but unless you circle back and tell the employees what you've learned and what actions are coming in response to it, you are not making full use of this tool and reaching the level of collaboration that you are trying to set.

Mihu: Can you share some of the things that the employees had to say, from this session?

Kimberly Paxton-Hagner: We love to see that they are connecting with our core values: they like working for an innovative company, they enjoy collaborating and teamwork, they have a great deal of pride in doing a job well, they care about the customers they are deeply connected with, sustainability and protecting the environment.

Stephanie Jackson: In other responses, we learned that having a vision and mission provided certainty, excitement and pride, as well as a sense of direction for a path forward. Stephanie Jackson: People like the kindness of our culture.

The company that helped run the surveys said that they rarely see this as a result.

Mihu: The path forward brings me to the topic of innovation. Having in mind Ms. Paxton-Hagner's extensive 15-year background as a graphic designer, what similarities are there in the mindset required to work in graphic design to spearheading Kwik Lok and developing innovation in packaging closures?

Kimberly Paxton-Hagner: I love this question! Graphic design is about innovating, so the connection is deep. In both, one of the first things that you need to do is listen: you need to find out not only what the customer thinks they need, but also what they want to accomplish. Also, when you are creating something, you might think pen to paper is the next step; but, creative minds need space and room to be inspired. It's an undervalued stage in the work because it doesn't immediately feel productive, but to be really innovative, you need to allow yourself to see things that are inspiring and to give yourself room to breathe, have fun and connect with uplifting people. This is the step that makes great designers and also the place from where great inventions happen. It's what we want to bring to our work.

Mihu: And what inspires each of you?

Stephanie Jackson: I am very connected to the concept of belonging. In my personal life, it is important for me to feel I am part of my family, my community and my friends. I want people I come in contact with to feel like they belong and they matter. That is what inspires me and I like to be a part of activating it. Whether I sit on a Board in my community, help at a fundraiser, support a friend, everything I do comes from a place of belonging and inclusiveness. We're simply better together; that, right there, inspires me!

Kimberly Paxton-Hagner: My inspiration is somewhat connected to Stephanie's: it's about the grassroots work being done in communities all across the world. We often see big organizations that have solutions and the money to back them, but the work on the ground that's being done by ordinary people in the community is the main work that's going to change the world.

I am inspired to connect through our philanthropic work here at Kwik Lok to organizations that are moving the needle in important areas, including women in business. Highlighting that work is inspiring to me.

Melissa Paxton Steiner: Being authentic is my biggest inspiration, I would say – both professionally and personally. I always want to provide people a safe place to be themselves, to not feel judged. You can see the true beauty in a person when they are their authentic selves, trust them more and also engage with them. I gravitate toward being authentic and letting that be an asset.



Melissa Paxton Steiner

Mihu: World Muse is committed to providing programming that's accessible and inclusive, always with the intent of promoting and supporting positive social change and amplifying the voices of those who have been historically under-represented. What values are at its core that can also be found at Kwik Lok?

Kimberly Paxton-Hagner: I loved working with World Muse, and I am still supporting them. The project is about 11-12 years old now. Back in 2015, I was board chair. The reason I connected with it is that it aims to lift voices and give people tools. Its focus is to primarily support young girls and help them see how they could be a force for social change and how they can help their communities through their unique skills. Working with them is very inspiring to me. What we have in common, here at Kwik Lok, is that we also want to help people develop their unique talents and connect these talents for a vision for the future.



Mihu: Speaking of special projects, I would like to look into partnerships that Kwik Lok selects. What does your collaboration with the U.S. Plastics Pact mean for the company?

Stephanie Jackson: Collaborating with US Plastics Pact has been huge for us because it connects us with people who are working on this big current problem. Plastic was, at first, a great solution, but it's outlived its purpose and its benefits are found to not nearly offset the damages it causes. We need to develop solutions and the U.S. Plastics Pact connects us with a multitude of companies that are also working on the same problem.

Kimberly Paxton-Hagner: We are always looking into working with people who are focusing on the same things we prioritize, around the environment and sustainability or supporting underrepresented groups in their communities and their work environment. I am also thinking about big collaborations in finding solutions for food safety and reducing food waste. We are always working with partners to try to create a closure that meets the needs of our clients while having a minimal negative impact on the environment, and eventually turning that around to a positive one.

Mihu: Ms. Jackson has said to always love a challenge, from health coaching to running a marathon and – together with the Paxton women – a company with a global reach. What were some of the interesting challenges you took on? And what is the mindset of loving a challenge?

Stephanie Jackson: My sisters and I recently came across a great book called 'The Infinite Game', by Simon Sinek, where he talks about having an infinite mindset. What we loved about it, enough to share it with our Board, is the

notion that we are not out to win a big trophy in life, but we should focus on how to stay in the game instead, how do we keep playing, and do the good work that we are doing. That mindset implies looking at the competition as worthy rivals who push us to grow and raise our standards.

Kimberly Paxton-Hagner: I love how you are always saying, Stephanie, "Prepare to be amazed," which truly encapsulates this. I am thinking of a challenge that is not necessarily huge, but it's an ongoing one: it's reminding people that it's not business as usual to reach a little further, with our new leadership.

While the bottom line is there, we are not going to measure anything against that, as we want to change the way people are looking at success.

Melissa Paxton Steiner: The biggest challenge in my life, one that I'm gradually overcoming, is being a part of the business with my sisters. It required taking a leap of faith, and I took it. I am in it and committed to work and enjoy the journey for as long as we can, together.

Stephanie: Another running challenge is disruption, to which I say, get comfortable with it! Change is inevitable; we say at Kwik Lok that we are going to push our employees to change, adapt, pivot. Get comfortable with it and even welcome disruption, invite it in and prepare to be amazed. What's on the other side is typically better than what we could have ever dreamed!

Mihu: How do you view the industry environment for women for the generations entering the workforce now? What advice would you offer them?

Melissa Paxton-Hagner: This is key to where we are today. Get yourself a support system! Surround yourself with people who see your value and will gladly remind you of it. Find the people that can help you skill up and push you to try things that might be, at first, difficult to imagine yourself doing. Make sure you have your core people stand by you during your difficult times, whether it's your teachers, your friends or your family. You're always going to have times when you doubt yourself, and somebody may always question your abilities; these people will lift you back up so you can stand strong.

Stephanie Jackson: I would say that you don't have to know all the answers! There are so many amazing resources, and people who have walked the path before you who can help. It only takes putting ego aside and asking for help. Doing that is a superpower. We as women are resourceful, we are strong, we are competent – and we do not need to do it alone. You don't have to do it alone! What seems like a vulnerability will be your strength.

Mihu: Thank you for a truly inspiring evening! +++