

Pivot Perfect

A Thought Leadership Q&A Series by The Brownstone Group

Andria Clack-Rogers Varnado: The “Hidden Art” Behind the Curtain – Ambition, Engagement, and Vulnerability

Andria Clack-Rogers Varnado is the Vice President & General Manager, Consumer Business, North America at Kohler. She began forging an impressive professional path early, receiving a degree in business administration from Clark Atlanta University before earning an MBA from Harvard Business School. As an analyst on Wall Street, Andria gained valuable management consulting and strategy expertise with Citibank, New York Life Insurance Company, and ZS Associates before pivoting to the world of consumer products and retail at Williams-Sonoma as Vice President, Head of Strategy & Business Development. Here, she secured the acquisition of Outward Inc., one of the largest tech M&As in the company’s history. Andria was later recruited as Vice President, Head of Strategy and Business Development at Macy’s, before joining Kohler in her current role to drive direct-to-consumer initiatives across online, in-store, and in-home channels. She also serves on the boards of PATTERN Beauty, Red Robin, and Umpqua Holdings Corporation.



Over the course of her career, Andria has been recognized by many publications, including Architectural Digest and Forbes, for her accomplishments, and was honored as one of the "Most Influential Women in Bay Area Business" by The San Francisco Business Times. Tim Boerkoel was honored to interview her for The Brownstone Group’s *Pivot Perfect* Thought Leadership series, diving deep into the concepts of authenticity, competence, empathy, and even theatre, resulting in a truly compelling feature on an inspiring, passionate leader.

Timothy Boerkoel (TBB): The personal accolades that describe you are deeply rooted in character – respected, credible, sound judgment, and insightful. And with those attributes, you appear to be well armed with an ambition and drive that continue to nourish a climbing career. Tell us about some of your childhood and family experiences and when this passion ignited.

Andria Clack-Rogers Varnado (AV): Growing up,

I was fortunate that my parents, sister, and extended family supported and invested in my many interests and activities. While my parents were both accountants – stark businesspeople - they entertained most of my varied interests during my childhood from art to soccer, piano to pageantry, dance, and theatre. The thinking may have been, throw her at everything and see what sticks. And through experiencing all those different activities, what stuck for me was theatre – I loved it! When I

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said I wanted to be an actress, I can imagine that my parents may have thought several things, but they rarely said anything contrary to me. I know how fortunate I am that my parents never pushed me in any particular direction and allowed me to explore these interests on my own, building confidence in my own decisions, in a safe way, from an early age.

This led me to the High School for Performing and Visual Arts in Houston, TX. School was a commitment of time and dedication, attending most days from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. Most years, half of the school day was spent focused on the various forms of your art area, with the other half spent in academics; and then after school consisted of practicing for whatever show you were in. This is how I spent my high school career, and I truly believed I was going to be an actress until I experienced a pivotal moment during the second half of high school. I worked in the back office of our theatre company where I experienced how the business of what we saw on stage came together - of ticket sales, marketing, advertising, and the Thespian Society. It felt like this "hidden art" was revealed to me and sparked my desire for business. As I consider this now, that time period connected the thread between my parents, who were in business, with the business side of art. I walked away from that experience knowing very strongly that I wanted to be in business and that this would become my college major. I'm so grateful that my childhood experiences created a mindset that nothing was off the table - explore what you want, take the opportunity to see what is out there, and then make the decision that feels right. This thinking has not failed me yet, and I continue to pursue a variety of interests both professionally and personally.

TBB: You have described your MLT MBA experience (Management Leadership for Tomorrow MBA Prep) as one that tapped into openness and transparency from the onset, cultivating deep bonds and instilling an

empowered confidence. Brené Brown has said in Dare to Lead: "If we want people to fully show up – so that we can innovate, solve problems, and serve people – we have to be vigilant about creating a culture where people feel safe, seen, heard, and respected." What role does vulnerability play in your leadership style and with you personally?

AV: Earlier in my career, I was afraid of vulnerability. As a young black woman, working on Wall Street, you are often coached to be like everyone else, even though we know it is better to stand out for the right reasons. When we talk about vulnerability, it's not about being sad or things not going your way. It may be thoughts of "I'm the only one," or "I'm the youngest person here," and that often plays into the imposter syndrome that is talked about in business. As a leader, vulnerability has become increasingly important to me as I understand its value. The ability to be vulnerable and invite vulnerability in with my colleagues is a privilege; it's psychological safety – to feel safe, seen, and heard. I want to create an environment where my team feels safe enough to tell me anything, whether personal or professional, so we can all work together. A professional example: as we embark on a new project, we all want it to work, it is new for all of us, and we don't quite know where we are going. As a leader, you know that you never have perfect data, so you decide to place a bet based on the data you have. This is a point of vulnerability, where I create the safety net that allows my team members to feel comfortable saying, "Andria, we don't know for certain, but this is what we believe and why." Once I am aware of what is unknown, we work together to get more information and start problem-solving. The opposite is what I want to avoid; where someone projects a false sense of confidence, and we head down the wrong path. It is critical for me as a leader to create this shared expectation that conveying ideas, questions, concerns, and even mistakes, are all encouraged.

This applies to our personal lives as well, continuing to cultivate that trusted space as a leader, and ensuring my team knows I value them as a whole. I must encourage transparency about personal challenges or conflicts, so we can all figure out the team adjustments needed. This consultive leadership approach allows grace for dealing with life issues without counting against performance or stunting career growth. Vulnerability leads to a place of truth. Knowing the context that has shaped a belief allows the team to either question the belief or support it – is the belief real, is it common, is it consistent, or is that a very specific belief; whatever it is, we all learn from that conversation.

Being vulnerable is also inspirational – how many speeches have you heard where the three keys to success are shared rather than the three challenges? The challenge speech reaches people, allowing them to feel seen, and then begin to face their own challenges differently. Vulnerability connects people. Although we've all heard "never cry at work", I am humbled that in some of my one-on-one meetings, team members have felt safe enough to share their emotions. I respect those times and appreciate that they feel comfortable enough to share in that moment with me. This strong emotion is not coming from a place of weakness, but a deep care for what is happening – they want to get the job done but face certain challenges. Sometimes it's simply a release, creating space to process emotions and move forward.

In my mind, vulnerability has become a core competency in business, developed from experience, expertise, and even internal "hunches" – and that's okay. We just need to understand it and build that competency into the process. Without vulnerability, trust is tough to develop in a team because something is being held back, and we are all not fully in it.

TBB: You are Vice President & General Manager of the Consumer Business Division for Kohler, leading change, and growth in a privately held

company, while simultaneously volunteering time and expertise in several different capacities for other organizations, including PATTERN Beauty LLC., Red Robin Gourmet Burgers, Umpqua Bank, and Junior League, How Women Lead, and Management Leadership for Tomorrow. What are some of the practices you embrace and how do you create balance and maintain a healthy spirit?

AV: I try to actively prune what is on my plate, to be mindful about which opportunities truly feel right, or to ask to modify situations where appropriate so that it best serves both parties. For me, maintaining a healthy spirit is about periodically canvassing my current activities – work, board activities, and personal – and asking myself what's working and what's not. I examine what I'm learning and how I'm growing and reflect on what can be used in other areas. And when it's not working, I determine what needs pruning – and decide if I need to have a conversation with someone or outsource something in my personal life. It's about being honest with myself. One of my personal challenges is that I put a lot of pressure on myself, wanting to do everything. I have a robust and exciting career, and I also have a growing family. Before starting a family, I used to work an abundance of hours a week, with lots of travel. I still desire success, but I can't commit to those hours anymore. This is where I "actively prune" because I want to be just as successful with family as I am with work.

I believe in being ambitious, engaged, and competent in all that I do; these are my values, and this is where I thrive. As I think about taking on any opportunity, I consider whether these three qualities are represented in the organization. If they are not, it's likely not a good fit with my spirit.

Today, I am focused on fitness and nutrition and navigating the right schedule for me. I've made a lot of progress, having set some different priorities at this stage in my life. I'm committed to learning and

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developing that competence and skill until it becomes a habit, so I can focus my energy on the next practice. When we think of improvement, many of us are really hard on ourselves – me included. I value the importance of recognition and accolades, as well as moments of reflection on accomplishments. If you are always focused on what you can improve and don't pause to reflect on the good, it may provide a less fulfilling life.

TBB: You have aligned yourself with powerhouse brands throughout your career such as Citibank, Macy's, Inc., Williams-Sonoma, Inc., and Kohler, strategically considering how their values match with yours. What values specifically do you seek out that ultimately bring you joy? What have you found challenging along the way?

AV: I remember a moment when I was at Harvard Business School, with a very busy schedule and lots of opportunities every day; I felt amazing, maybe the best I've ever felt. I was in class, in the wonderful space of learning, and I experienced a pivotal moment. I remember thinking to myself, what is happening right now? What is it about this moment that I can recreate because I'm enjoying what I'm feeling - it was a sense of ambition and a confidence that I, and those around me, could accomplish anything. I was inspired and felt like I inspired others when I spoke, and we (my classmates) were together in all of this. I also felt deeply engaged; with no mobile phones allowed in class, everyone was present and living in the moment. Ambition, inspiration, and engagement became the three values that I identified and that continue to live on in me. Every job or opportunity that I've considered since then, I've asked, "Do I see these qualities reflected in the organization, the leadership, and the initiatives of the position?" I ask specific, targeted questions to determine if they exist.

Over time, and in the spirit of focus, I have traded off the value of inspiration for competence, now seeing the increasing value of competence - a leader's

expertise, understanding of implications and impact, etc. - to support great ideas in the world. That is what brings me joy – living my values. And I also carry them through in my personal life and extracurricular activities – always questioning if my experiences are bringing me that same level of joy. I especially appreciate that these values connect my professional and personal worlds and make them both places I want to be.

As I consider some of the amazing companies I have worked for throughout my career, they are all within different industries - I began in finance, then consulting, and now consumer brands – but the consistent theme is that my work has made an impact on people, which has been accomplished in different ways. I've worked with products and services that help us to live better lives – me, my family and friends, and my colleagues. Right now, I'm in the home products business. I believe our homes are incredible places that hold our deepest insecurities and purest joys. Whether it's bringing your first child home or celebrating a retirement or birthday, at Kohler, we think about how to create a home that allows you to truly be comfortable and at peace. Everyone should come home and have that moment of *ahhhh* ... I can relax and be myself. I'm grateful to have made an impact and to have found value and joy in aligning with organizations where I can be who I am: the same person at work and at home.

TBB: The landscape of consumer products industries continues to change – consumer needs and expectations evolve; technology continues to advance; and the leadership of organizations is shifting. What do you believe women bring to the boardroom and the executive table as they offer perspective and address the complex challenges of today? How do you envision the future?

AV: This is exciting! I get to dream about the future and, at the same time, advocate for some of the great practices that are already in place. The

fullness of our lives has become more complex and continues to grow. In business, especially in consumer products, this complexity doesn't just include more technology but also multiple technologies, and it's moving more quickly than our operations are prepared to support at times. The state and focus of work today is change – products, services, and how we work ... and specifically with women, who bring forth the nuances involved. In this environment of change, we are more empowered to talk about the subtleties and vulnerabilities than ever before.

In its most stereotypical form, multiple studies have shown that women have had to balance more roles both at home and work. There are several articles that discuss the "invisible load" that is carried. At work, women are not only doing their job, but they're the event planner, the culture carrier, the note taker, etc. At home, they also assume multiple responsibilities. Women also have the opportunity, especially in the boardroom, to represent all stakeholders of the business. For example, someone may finish their office hours and then must care for elderly parents or a disabled family member. Because of that, they come to the office each day with a deeper perspective of the evolution of products and how to adapt to the home with real-life needs. As an employee, they can share some of these subtle yet distinct stakeholder impacts, greatly improving the process and ultimately serving our customer. Identifying and being open to this multi-faceted employee and the perspective he or she brings can help leaders understand how to evolve internal policies and practices necessary for supporting the needs of this person and their families. What I see for the future is more dialogue around all these facets of our lives that have been happening in the background for decades; it's not new, but now it's on the table and visible.

One of the aspects of an ideal future I will focus on is the concept of operating with authenticity or bringing our full selves to work - the idea of bringing

personal experiences to the table without judgment or professional limitations. It would encourage openness and flexibility for employees at all levels, even executives, to work from home in order to be their fullest selves. We should no longer be saying to those who want to be in the C-suite, "You can't have those issues. Someone else will have to handle them for you so you can be fully and physically present." Although technology companies have their own challenges, I am impressed with how they have paved the way in the last decade for this type of support, such as matching parental leave, offering more work flexibility, onsite childcare, and comprehensive and subsidized healthcare. These examples are part of a more comprehensive model of balance and support in order to create a work culture that truly enables us to perform at our best. We need leaders who are willing to take some risks to achieve this on a broader scale - leaders who can be vulnerable about their own experiences and the challenges they have faced, and share ideas of what could make a difference in those moments.

TBB: In a society focused on achievement and awards, you have earned what might qualify as an EGOT (Emmy, Golden Globe, Oscar, and Tony). You've been recognized for your work and vision by some of the most notable - namely Architectural Digest, Black Enterprise, Diligent, Forbes, The Everygirl, The San Francisco Business Times, and The Wall Street Journal. How do you process this recognition and what does it mean to you be an "influencer" today?

AV: Some of the things I have accomplished have never been done before, and initially, that felt crazy to me – even heavy at times. I recall when I joined my first Board of Directors; I was the youngest, non-founding executive to ever serve a public board. The board was filled with amazing and sharp individuals which added to my imposter syndrome. I thought, "What did they see in me?" I realize that these moments are earned not just for us, but also for those witnessing our paths.

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Along the way, we sometimes question whether we can get through it – and then we work hard and come out on the other side. The awards, recognition, and accolades help to shine a light on these stories, and they are a reminder of what has happened - history happens quickly. I can only hope that this is an inspiration for others (and a moment of pride for my mother). They even inspire me to keep going, to create the next milestone.

Similarly, I have been incredibly fortunate to be mentored by the same people that I used to read about in these articles myself, and mostly informally. My dear friend Caroline Clarke once said, “Everyone wants to be close to the powerful to be mentored, but you can be powerfully mentored by someone you have never met.” Someone I truly admire, Shellye Archambeau, former CEO, multi-board leader, and the author of Unapologetically Ambitious, is an example of this. While I have since met her, I recall being sent an article about her approach over a decade ago, and now reading her book, we learn how she creatively pursued her goal of CEO while understanding the tradeoffs and choosing what was most important to her with her friends and family. Hilliard Terry, a multi-board member, former CFO, and advisor is a friend and also a mentor, sponsor, and advocate. I trust him to

be incredibly honest with me; whether we’re discussing compensation, negotiations, or just getting a deeper perspective on the human side of complex business topics. I had the great pleasure of being mentored by the late Elisabeth Charles, who I initially connected with through the Adweek Mentorship Program. I remember when we initially met, she kindly told me I should be a mentor, not a mentee – I was flattered, but I’m a lifelong learner, so I didn’t want to take myself out of the learning seat. Our careers had circled similar industries, and Elisabeth was transparent about the people, companies, and experiences that she had, never to downplay or disadvantage one, but always to offer guidance from her own experience and some considerations for me. As our friendship grew, we exchanged perspectives on new opportunities for the both of us and made resulting connections. This experience reminded me that we can learn from any seat.

I know that so much more lies ahead for me, especially because I love to continue learning and growing. Recognition came when I was truly living in my values, choosing what I wanted next in my career, and aligning my decisions with those values. These are grateful moments in time, but they’re not the end; I’m always preparing for the encore.

About The Brownstone Group

The Brownstone Group was launched in 2015 with a mission to offer the most effective executive search, strategic consulting, and leadership advisory services. We introduce exceptional talent to brands and their leaders, transforming businesses and careers. Founder Tim Boerkoel possesses more than 25 years of retail, consumer, hospitality, and luxury experience, advising and recruiting for startups and global corporations alike in their searches for CEOs, Presidents, Board Members and C-Suite talent. Brownstone, along with its global network of affiliate partners, operates as a true partner to clients ensuring swift yet long-lasting results.

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