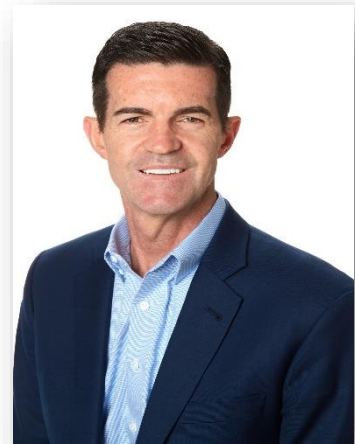


# Pivot Perfect

*A Thought Leadership Q&A Series by The Brownstone Group*

## Kevin Corning: International Lifestyle Sets the Course for Military and Career Journey

Kevin Corning is President, Latin America for Bata Corporation – a family-owned business founded in 1894, and the world’s second-largest shoemaker by volume, known for innovation and designing stylish and comfortable footwear. He is based in Santiago, Chile, and is responsible for leading this omnichannel footwear and accessories business with 1000 stores and operations in six countries, including DTC, along with three manufacturing factories. His current role is a comprehensive range of accountability including creative ideation, merchandising, brand marketing, product development, supply chain, and emerging technology. Given Kevin’s diverse and well-rounded international background and having worked within the consumer package goods, industrial, accessories, apparel, and footwear sectors, he is able to contribute significant knowledge and a fresh perspective to many facets of the business.



We learned that his personal fascination with learning, living, and traveling around the globe has been a compliment to his professional interest in contributing, leading, and mentoring teams, small and large, over the past 25+ years. Kevin’s passion for the international has taken his career to four continents, working for brands such as Kraft Foods, Whirlpool Corporation, Nike, Inc., Fossil, Mars, Inc., DKSH, Carter's | OshKosh B'gosh, Church's Chicken, and Claire's.

His interest and enthusiasm for immersing himself into uncharted challenges, with different positions and various cultures is extraordinary and makes him ideal for our Pivot Perfect series. Kevin shared with us his desire to understand each business and identify what is working as he explores new pathways to impact results and ensure profitability and success for both external and internal partners.

The Brownstone Group’s Tim Boerkoel had the opportunity to discuss multiple global industry trends and emerging markets and dig deeper to discover Kevin’s perspective on assimilating in new cultures, roles, and businesses. He takes us on a journey that is filled with learning curves, although they appear seamless as they are driven by his international lifestyle goals and dreams.

**Timothy Boerkoel (TB):** Kevin, you began traveling the world with your family from a very young age as the son of a military dad; tell us how those experiences shaped your passion for international culture and what role that played as you shaped your career path?

**Kevin Corning (KC):** Actually, I can take you back to the exact moment I had the inspiration for the career I have today, but first I should provide a little context. I grew up in a military family, and my father was an Army attaché in Bangkok, Thailand. We lived there for the first time when I was a toddler. From there we lived in the U.S. – both DC and NY, then

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moved back to Thailand when I was in grade school. My aunt worked for Citibank in Hong Kong during this time, which gave me this amazing opportunity to go back and forth and experience these cultures. I hold a vivid memory of standing on my aunt's terrace when I was ten, overlooking Hong Kong harbor while the adults were inside enjoying a cocktail party. I remember thinking, "whatever this is, this is what I want to do." As a ten-year-old, I certainly didn't know how it was going to play out, but in a room of people including military, state department, bankers, peace corps, and corporate types, I just knew this was the lifestyle I wanted to have. At the time, I shared with my mom that when we traveled around Asia, the best feeling that I had was waking up in a new country, with the excitement of seeing everything new, hearing a different language, experiencing different food, and seeing how different people behaved – that all influenced me deeply from a very young age.

The military later brought our family to the Virginia area where I went to high school, then college at William and Mary, and then joined the Army like my father, serving stateside and training as a helicopter pilot and paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne Division.

My career began with Kraft Foods in Chicago, giving me an incredible foundation for business, where I spent over five years developing a foundation of early lessons for the next phase of my career. However, my heart still longed for work overseas. With no international experience, it was difficult to get my foot in the door for an international opportunity, but I remained determined to find that role. Finally, in 1994, Whirlpool offered me a Regional Director of Marketing position for Asia Pacific based in Singapore. When that door into international work opened, I walked through it and never looked back.

And since then, I have managed my career uniquely, based on personal interests more than any aspiration toward a title, or particular position. I was always interested in being far away from the company headquarters, close to the business, working in gritty, grimy, emerging markets. My life goal was to create an interesting career around the world, and I have kept this international spirit alive by having the opportunity to work for global brands

and to change companies along the way. There are very few companies that simply move you from country to country over 25 years, so I had to cobble together among multiple companies in order to make it all happen. What helped me, though was that I was crystal clear in my objectives - I knew exactly what I wanted to do and I could see the destination. This made it easier to make good decisions.

There were some other influencing moments at a young age that have stuck with me. Although I landed in the military and have found success, the "young Kevin Corning" would not have been described as disciplined or motivated; impressionable with a desire to please for sure. My mom had a direct, yet loving way about her and I remember her giving me a bit of a wake-up call, sharing that she was worried about me. My 5th grade report card was not impressive, and she said if I didn't begin to apply myself, I may grow up to become a garbage man - going into detail as to what that would look and feel like, painting a very clear picture. She then left me to think about it. Nothing more was said, but I certainly thought about that for the rest of the summer. I was a "dreamer" and my mom's vision did not fit into the picture I envisioned. I somehow found a way to apply myself because my grades completely turned around during 6th grade. My parents were thrilled and when asked what happened, I emotionally recounted the garbage man story, which ironically they didn't even recall – it left quite an impression on me - maybe my first pivot.

**TB: Your ROTC scholarship from William & Mary, then military training and accelerated advancement in the U.S. Army is truly notable; how does that level of training and leadership impact how you lead in the business world? Describe the transition from military to corporate.**

**KC:** There is a lot of detail to mine here - not just the obvious discipline of the programs. ROTC provides a framework and a success model, it shows what is possible if you apply yourself – the military badges you wear on your uniforms in the military, the schools you go to, the feeling of confidence when you are physically fit. ROTC pointed me toward my first path, one of constantly learning, being

challenged, and being given a tremendous responsibility. I was on an ROTC scholarship at William & Mary and upon graduation, I served my four-year obligation. The Army provides an opportunity to do uncommon and exceptional things far in advance of your age (like jumping out of planes and flying helicopters). When you complete your training, you report to your unit and are responsible for a large team of people. You quickly realize that you can really achieve results under difficult circumstances and tremendous pressure, with few resources, when you're tired, hungry, and scared. All of these elements are intentionally applied to develop stronger leaders.

I witnessed world-class leaders up close and personal, spending a year as a General's Aide-de-Camp. It was an honor. From such a close lens, I was able to see why they were chosen as General's Officers. Military leadership isn't solely about exercising rank and telling people what to do and it wasn't the expected commands and orders that made things happen, although there were times when that technique was appropriate. What I learned was that the role model leaders in the Army best in class of Army leadership inspire and motivate. They lead by example, show genuine concern for people their soldiers, communicate clearly, and are fully engaged consistently, 24/7. This was a powerful foundation of leadership for me to take to the corporate world.

My transition to corporate followed, and I was fortunate that there were some recruiting firms that focused on junior military officers, knowing the value of the leadership training. Kraft had some prior military on staff and strategically hired a few military officers each year. When I joined Kraft, I knew little about corporate business, especially compared to my peers who were just out of business school and understood the work. And once I began to understand it, I thought sitting at a desk with a computer was boring having come from jumping from planes. But the military trains you to become experts at getting with the program and adapting, sharing cultural values, making things happen, and achieving results – and I put my military training to work. With some early feedback and encouragement of a bright future with the skills to lead a team and motivate, but analytical and

technical skills needed, I did the work and invested in that learning – going to night school at Kellogg earning an MBA. I was fortunate to have worked for this best-in-class company along with people who believed in me and helped me along the way.

**TB: Your career has led you to many well-known, global, consumer, and industrial brands encompassing several different markets; what key management characteristics are consistent wherever your career travels??**

**KC:** There is one consistent characteristic I have learned - from company to country to culture – no matter where you go, business is all about people – it begins and ends with people. Leaders around the world all have subtle differences, but they all lead, impact, and motivate people. They care about them, figure out a way to inspire them to do things they didn't think possible. The commonality is the connection with people and the ability to impact self-esteem and achieving goals – this has proven to be very powerful.

I've been fortunate to have mentors that have unlocked opportunities for me by understanding my motivations. And as a leader, when I wasn't able to identify what motivated someone, I'd just ask them. There are a variety of motivators - title, money, mobility – leaders find those motivators and lead.

Strong leaders also have a razor-sharp focus on consumers. Nike was a good example of this for me. They are a company known for strong brand-building and strategic marketing capabilities. They have a deep understanding of their consumer and focus on them - with their workforce being their consumer, market research is internal, making it innate and organic.

Another key characteristic is a focus on constant improvement and maintaining good governance – when there are breakdowns in the leadership fundamentals, companies lose their way. A recent and enlightening example of this played out as I started with Bata.

Early in your career, you are influenced by the shiny resume credentials such as Harvard and Stanford MBA, and then as your career evolves as mine has, you meet people who don't have those credentials,

yet they have an innate ability to understand business. I had the opportunity to spend three months with my predecessor Roberto Longo who had worked for BATA for 45 years. He started in the warehouse in Italy when he was about 20 and rose to the level of Regional President twice, first in Asia and then in Latin America. He knows more about every function of business than anyone I have ever met in my career. He is a leader with the ability to impact all aspects of the business with first-hand knowledge – he is able to operate every piece of machinery on our factories, he understands the stores and what is happening, he understands products from how they are made to what makes them sell. And technically, he is at the top of his game operating a MAC like a college student. Be careful about being influenced by fancy pedigree. I learned so much from him it was humbling – and a reminder not to get complacent or think you have learned all there is to or you are at the top of your game. I was impressed and inspired to witness what he learned in his rigor - a gift to add Roberto to my list of role models at this point in my career.

**TB: You have been chosen on more than one occasion for your ability to build a new team in a new international market – how do different cultures impact the building of a team from the ground up?**

**KC:** Given my experiences, I pride myself on this and really feel confident that a company can place me anywhere and I can build a great team. I enjoy it and find it exciting, and that has a lot to do with it, but it all stems from my childhood of living overseas, moving, and adapting. Part of building a team is immersing yourself in it all and just figuring it out. For each team I have built, I'm outside of my culture and my language and have learned the importance of sensitivity as you approach the process. It's critical to take the time needed to learn the lay of the land, gathering the experiences of the culture around you, along with your own personal benchmarks and experience.

If you are familiar with the Myers-Briggs test, I am an ENFJ – Extrovert, Intuitive, Feeling, Judgement - which is most unusual as a senior business leader. The F is what makes me different, most are T - Thinkers. The feeling component helps me in being

attuned to the environment as I gain credibility and respect in the initial building of each team. As an American working overseas, I can be immediately stereo-typed. Sometimes there is a good reason for it, but I've always tried to give a different angle on an American. It has been especially valuable to seek assistance in understanding the cultural differences when choosing talent. There are cues that one misses when you are new to a culture. I speak Spanish and can interview people myself here in Chile, but before I hire anyone, I'm going to have someone else on my team meet with them who will intuitively understand their background and see things that would be invisible to me.

This reminds me of one of the challenges I face as my role becomes more senior and the pressures build – as senior leaders, we have to remember and make time for the “niceties.” Early in my corporate career, I recall noticing the difference between how the military and corporate handled the human side – the military was so caring, and I thought then, I'm going to remember this. It's the people that remain the common thread through the successes of any team and all people at all levels want to be seen and recognized.

**TB: As it applies to US-based jobs, how do you value your international experience and how do hiring managers view the relevance?**

**KC:** This is important and personal for me. If it's an international job, my experience is highly valued - I came right out of central casting for my current role with Bata. I am not sure hiring managers and I view the international experience through the same lens, especially for U.S.-based jobs, and I think it is important to share the view through my lens. Unfortunately, I have often found myself in a position of counteracting hiring manager beliefs and overcoming that obstacle in an interview. I experienced this in 2019 when I left Carter's/Osh Kosh B'gosh as EVP International for this children's omnichannel retailer as a result of a restructure. I was also still serving on the board of Claire's and Interim CEO for this global jewelry and accessory retailer.

After about six months, I began my job search just before the world was disrupted by Covid, changing

the landscape for international jobs. I had many interviews, but few were purely international as travel was halted. It was frustrating to feel like hiring managers were missing the value of my experience. Having worked in seven countries outside the U.S. over the course of over 20 years, I was labeled as “way too much international” or “international on steroids.” They seemed to think because business took place out of the U.S. it was somehow not applicable. And my thinking is - it’s all business whether in South America, Europe, Asia, or the U.S. The customers may be different, but as an American, I bring a level of insight. International experience provides a component of managing complexity outside of the U.S. I managed through a catastrophic flood at a Levi Strauss’ jean factory in Thailand; an airport shut down due to protestors with tourists being refused entry and impacting business; a factory lockout in Brazil by a renegade union which required finding ways to keep the factory operating and explain to those in the U.S. why results were impacted; issues and FCPA challenges. These are just a few of my examples. International business management experience is invaluable and develops adaptive, creative, resilient managers with solid EQ that is strengthened by working outside of their culture.

**TB: Just as you have played an integral role in the careers of many along your path, who have been some of your mentors, and what have they taught you?**

**KC:** I have been extremely lucky with many mentors, beginning with Tom Sampson at Kraft Foods. I was just promoted from Brand Assistant to Brand Associate, so doing fairly well but still struggling with the transition coming out of the military. Tom believed in me and asked for me on his brand team, Velveeta. He said, “I see a lot of potential in you. I’ll give you a meaningful project and coach you – you’ll be a success on a meaningful track.” That sounded really appealing to me. And I specifically remember learning from him that performance reviews are two-fold – first to celebrate what you do well and second to identify what to improve. He took the fear out of performance reviews. That has remained with me to this day.

Andy Mooney hired me at Nike and is another mentor. He took a chance on me, putting me in Asia and Hong Kong to start up their equipment division, and it changed my life. I delivered results for him, and he later asked what I wanted to do next - he listened and helped me achieve my goal of becoming a Country General Manager in South America for Nike. Another Nike mentor was Frits Van Paasschen, a tremendous talent as Head of Strategic Planning followed by President of the America’s where he was my boss for a period of time before Eric Sprunk took over that role. He promoted me to Nike Brazil which became life-changing, as I learned the Portuguese language, became a permanent resident of Brazil, and have lived there for five years. Eric, later the COO of Nike, was a role model also. There is always something to learn from your bosses – they all have qualities worth exploring.

Mike Casey, CEO at Carter’s modeled the power of optimism and positive thinking which has influenced how I manage even today. You’d go into his office thinking the sky is falling and come out of there with your feet not touching the ground believing anything was possible.

These experiences tend to be more concentrated early in your career when your boss’ role is to develop you. As your career progresses, that responsibility becomes your role. When mentors appear later in your career, pay attention and be open to it. Roberto from Bata is a wonderful example of that.

The mentors in my career helped unlock doors for me and provided opportunities I may not have otherwise had.

**TB: Given your diverse global and multi-industry experiences to date, what are three significant suggestions you have for executives who may want to pivot?**

**KC:** I’ve made a lot of pivots in my career in order to keep my international career dreams viable, other times pivoting to go back to work. On the pro-side, my experiences have been broad – spanning brands from pet food to luxury goods. And the con, I didn’t go deep, except perhaps in consumer products or apparel and footwear. This is just something to be aware of when managing your career. My overall

advice is simple - 1. Don't get hung up on what's ahead or be too calculating about your next move, it may seem like you're not focused on your current job. Be mindful and present. It unlocks a lot when you are sincerely focused on the now and liberating to do your job as though you are not concerned about what is next. 2. Say "yes." Don't overthink what is next, be flexible and open. You may be surprised where a job will lead you. I had a few surprises over the years. 3. When you are given a chance – maximize it. "If they ask for your hand, give them your arm." If they send me to Chile, I will learn Spanish. If they send me to Brazil, I will learn the language and everything I can about the culture. Remain open and say yes.

**TB: You're the pilot, where are you headed and what do you hope to accomplish?**

**KC:** At this point, I am pretty clear on my mission. I've joined Bata, a family-owned footwear company,

founded in 1894 and is now headquartered in Switzerland. Their model at one time was to go to a new country, buy property, start a factory, begin making shoes, open up stores, and quickly become the leading shoe leader in that country. Although they are no longer as dominant as they once were, they are still sizeable. There is a new CEO, new leadership team members, and I am a new Regional President. I've joined the effort to transform Bata. We have a clear mission – modernize it, make it more relevant, improve the product offering, and strengthen its omnichannel approach to the marketplace. I'm applying all that I have learned in my experiences to help accomplish the mission. The goal is to maximize the value to the owners and return it to its original glory. I was once told that as a General Manager you are given responsibility and stewardship of a company's people, assets, and brands and it is your job to return them to a company all in better shape than when you received them. With a great deal of intention, that is why I am here.

## 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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