Hugh Ekberg has thought like an engineer since he was a kid, when he and his brothers would spend hours tearing down engines for fun and rebuilding them to make go-karts and minibikes.

“Taking apart your own toys to fix them was something you did for enjoyment,” Ekberg remembers. “I’ve always been a tinkerer; I like to understand how things work.”

Ekberg’s passion and aptitude for engineering and design thinking has taken him from building go-karts to building businesses as president of Kitchen & Bath Americas at Kohler Co., one of the oldest and largest privately held US companies and an industry leader in kitchen and bath products.

Headquartered in Kohler, Wisconsin, the company has come a long way since the days when its founder first covered hog scalders in enamel and marketed them as bathtubs. Ekberg’s challenge is to lead the well-established brand in adapting to the demands of today’s ever-changing marketplace.

“The advent of the Internet and consumers’ greatly enhanced ability to gain information and form opinions are very powerful forces,” Ekberg says. “We need to make sure we’re interacting with the customer in that space and changing our mindset for how we communicate, how we serve, and the experiences our products deliver.”

This atmosphere of change makes “the world of toilets, showers, faucets, and sinks quite exciting” for an engineer who has always had management dreams.

**A HEAD FOR BUSINESS**

After graduating from MIT with a degree in mechanical engineering, Ekberg made a decision that would change the course of his career. Instead of taking one of the offers he received for engineering positions, he joined Procter & Gamble (P&G) as a production manager.

“I went directly into the manufacturing world,” he says. “You use your engineering education constantly in that space.”

Applying his knowledge to the company’s liquid laundry detergent business, Ekberg coordinated new product development launches for brands such as Tide and Era. During critical-path meetings at manufacturing facilities, he identified a gap in his financial analysis and marketing strategy skill sets.

“I found it frustrating that I couldn’t contribute much to the conversation because I didn’t have enough expertise in those broader business areas,” he remembers. “I decided I needed to fast-track my knowledge base.”

Although Ekberg had developed a deep respect for operations and manufacturing at P&G, the experience convinced him that he wanted to pursue a general management path. He looked at universities that offered joint master’s programs in business and engineering for those wanting to pursue business leadership roles in manufacturing companies.
He felt Northwestern’s dual-degree MMM Program, which at the time awarded an MBA from Kellogg and a Master of Engineering Management from McCormick, was the best complement to the experience and education he already had. The program was still somewhat new, and Ekberg enjoyed the opportunity to help shape the program in its early stages.

“We were a little outside the norm,” he recalls. “There was a core group of us who knew we wanted to stay in the world of manufacturing and operations, but we wanted to be business leaders. We were part of creating something that continues to evolve and become better.”

**IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITY**

Seeking a leadership role, Ekberg turned his focus to the private equity space after Northwestern, joining American Industrial Partners and serving as corporate manufacturing manager of Esco Aluminum, one of its portfolio companies. “It was a chance to get a higher-level position with more authority, more decision-making power, and more ability to truly influence the business,” he explains.

The company was considering going public, which provided great learning experience for Ekberg, who was challenged to improve Esco’s operational efficiency. The position afforded him what he was looking for—responsibility and decision-making authority.

After that company went public, Ekberg began looking for new challenges, and in 1995 joined Hirsh Industries, a manufacturer and marketer of home and office organization and storage products. Over the next five years, during a period of rapid growth, he rose from head of operations to president.

“We went from being a $25 million company to about $120 million in four years, through both organic growth and acquisitions,” he says. “It was outstanding experience in terms of running a business.”

Always seeking to stretch himself, Ekberg looked for opportunities to buy his own company after ten years at Hirsh. A search firm suggested he talk to The Weitz Company, a general contractor, design-builder, and construction manager trying to decide what to do with a business it had purchased. Not exactly what Ekberg was looking for, the company and its management team so impressed him that in 2006 he made the “crazy decision to go join a construction company” as supply chain president, and ended up on the company’s board of directors.

Although it was an industry Ekberg knew little about, he considers the move one of his best decisions. “It reminded me that the most important thing you can do as a business leader is continue to learn and improve,” he shares. “The best way to do this is put yourself in uncomfortable situations, because that’s where you’re going to grow and advance. If you work hard and deliver results, you’re going to get opportunities to take on new challenges.”

**THE ENGINEERING DISCIPLINE IS A TURBO BOOSTER TO CREATIVITY, IN TERMS OF BEING ABLE TO THINK ABOUT WHAT’S POSSIBLE AND WHAT CAN BE DONE DIFFERENTLY.**

That next opportunity came calling in 2011 when a recruiter from Kohler contacted him. “I knew in my heart of hearts that I was a brand guy—I never got that out of my system ever since P&G,” he says. “It was a pretty easy decision to join a great company with a great brand like Kohler.”

**TRANSFORMATION THROUGH DESIGN**

Believing nothing is perfect, Ekberg applies the lessons he learned at Northwestern to identify problems and opportunities for improvement at Kohler.

“The engineering discipline is a turbo booster to creativity, in terms of being able to think about what’s possible and what can be done differently,” he explains. “In business today, the need for constant transformation becomes more and more a requirement for success.”

Ekberg has applied design thinking and systematic problem-solving throughout his career. What he enjoys most at Kohler is using that approach to build strong teams that maximize individual strengths to achieve shared goals.

“Design thinking doesn’t just involve designers or engineers or marketers and it doesn’t just involve products—it requires all the disciplines challenging each other and working together to design solutions to complex business and product opportunities,” he says. “Design thinking isn’t about getting to quick solutions; it’s about exploring what’s possible. That’s the real power and benefit.”

His passion for design has led him to serve on the board of Northwestern’s Master of Product Design and Development Management Program. As a proud Northwestern Engineering alumnus, he wants to contribute something to the university that gave him so much. As a businessman, staying connected to the University is critical for his continued development.

“I enjoy the exposure to the design community and the design world,” he says. “It’s a group of people with outstanding minds and ways of thinking that are different from mine. I want to continue to hone my ability to think like a designer because it enhances my ability to think like an engineer and be a better business leader.”

**SARA LANGEN**