

ENGINEERING A PATH TO THE C-SUITE

ALANNA COTTON'S COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP WAS FORGED AT NORTHWESTERN.

Over more than 30 years steering global consumer brands, Alanna Cotton ('96) has forged a leadership philosophy built on inclusivity and collaborative problem-solving—one she traces directly to her engineering training at Northwestern.

"The Northwestern experience was really about teaching us students how to solve complex problems with creativity and collaboration," Cotton says. That collaborative approach has carried through her career, animating how she mobilizes teams, divisions, and entire organizations toward a shared outcome. "What that means is everyone gets involved in helping the company, the division, the team, the product move to the next level," she says, noting that each team member brings a unique perspective.

As a Northwestern student, Cotton served as a counselor for the University's Minority Engineering Opportunity Program (MEOP), where she fondly recalls first developing her leadership and mentorship skills. She graduated from Northwestern with a bachelor of science in environmental engineering.

The leadership philosophy rooted in collaboration that Cotton developed at Northwestern anchored her through the most consequential chapters of her corporate career. As president and chief business officer of Ferrero North America, she commanded a workforce of 6,000 across the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean, orchestrating the integration of major acquisitions into the company's operations—a feat requiring not just strategic clarity, but the careful alignment of newly merged teams around a common vision.

Before Ferrero, as president of operations for Central and Eastern Europe at Coca-Cola, Cotton helped spearhead a sweeping portfolio transformation, navigating hard trade-offs to grow and sustain brands under resource constraints.

At Samsung Electronics America, as senior vice president and general manager, she helped pivot the smartwatch category from communication-first to health-focused, while overseeing hundreds of product launches a year, from virtual reality devices to personal computers to tablets. "That was one of the most fun times of my career, blending technical know-how with innovation and leadership skills," she says.

In her first role after graduating from Northwestern, Cotton served as a team leader at Procter & Gamble before earning an MBA at Stanford University and holding leadership roles at PepsiCo.

Today, her collaborative approach leans heavily into mentorship in her latest chapter as founder and CEO of CorARC Ventures. There, Cotton advises and invests in owners and founders driving the next phase of growth for their companies—channeling her three decades of operating experience into helping other leaders scale. "It's all about helping others realize their dreams," she says.

Across every chapter, Cotton says the constant has been Northwestern's emphasis on solving complex problems collaboratively—a skill that has outlasted any single technical specialty. "It has led me to the C-suite, and now to build CorARC Ventures," she says.

Cotton also serves on nonprofit boards, alongside her enduring loves of reading and biking around Dallas–Fort Worth.

To current Northwestern students and recent alums, Cotton advises them to take full advantage of a Northwestern education, inside and outside the engineering classroom. "Engineering is not done in a vacuum," she notes. "It's about solving real-world problems to make the greatest impact." And collaboration, she says, is the key.

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