

Jill Jinks is a founding – and current – director of Private Bank of Buckhead. In this interview the accomplished insurance industry expert shares her thoughts on leadership.



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LEADERSHIP

Insurance Executive Leads by Consensus

Written by Sylvia Small
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Snapshot: Jill K. Jinks



Jill K. Jinks, 53, is president and CEO of Insurance House Holdings, which owns and manages the Southern General Insurance Co., Southern General Underwriters Insurance Co., Southern General Indemnity Insurance Co., and Insurance House Inc. An Atlanta native, Jinks serves as president of the Georgia Association of Property and Casualty Insurance Cos.

Jinks earned a bachelor's in business administration from Stetson University, a master's of science from Georgia State University, and an MBA from New York University.

Womenetics: What is Insurance House?

Jill Jinks: Insurance House is one of the largest regional wholesalers in the Southeast. The company was started by my father in 1965, and I became its president in 1996. We don't deal directly with the public.

We work with retail insurance agents who have special needs.

For example, there's an island off the coast of South Carolina that's inhabited by research monkeys who are infected with AIDS. As you can imagine, not everyone would be interested in insuring that type of operation. We take the very worst, the most unusual, and the scariest scenarios and figure out how to craft insurance products for them.

Womenetics: Is your leadership style different than a man's approach might be in your position?

Jinks: I would say yes in the traditional sense and no in the most recent sense. I'm very much a consensus leader. I'm a licensed Coast Guard captain who recently returned from sailing in the Caribbean. There were five of us on that trip. Each one needed to put in 20 percent to get the job done.

I don't think many successful leaders today use the command-and-control approach. That's because the transparency, accessibility, visibility, and accountability in organizations are so high.

Womenetics: What traits do you possess that have helped you in your career?

Jinks: Looking back over the last 15 years or so, I would say it's recognizing when I was failing miserably in my job and having the humility and the drive to get better as opposed to repeatedly pounding my head against a wall. I got really good mentors who were supportive, but direct. They let me know when what I was trying to accomplish wasn't working.

You must be accountable to yourself first and to the organization second. You need to honestly answer one fundamental question: Am I making it or not?

Womenetics: You've served on a variety of boards over the years. Why do you do that?

Jinks: I do that because I learn and gain a different perspective. I'm a trustee to Stetson University and chairman of the board of advisors at its business school. At Stetson I work with a former chairman of Publix, someone who heads a public company, and another individual who runs a law firm. We all face the same common leadership challenges, but those people are in different industries and venues.

When you get to the top of the pyramid, you encounter complicated problems. I call them world hunger problems. You try to find anybody who has seen or done it before. Do they have a better idea or a different solution? If somebody's got a better way, I want to know it.

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Womenetics: What activities do you participate in outside the office?

Jinks: I enjoy tennis, running, gardening, and playing with my dogs, boxers. I meet the most wonderful people when I sail to other countries. They don't come from my world. I'm able to see how they live, make a living, and shelter themselves. It's a complete escape from being in Atlanta.

Womenetics: What's your favorite place to visit?

Jinks: I like Roseau, Dominica, which is south of Guadeloupe in the West Indies. I fell in love with the people and their devotion to each other. All the guys take their fish to the market where they'll trade it for papayas, bananas, and mangoes. There's an equilibrium in that economy. Everybody seemed happy. When you saw the smiles on people's faces, you had to step back and say "Wow!" I don't see that as much as I should back in Atlanta trying to get through security at the airport.

Womenetics: What did you aspire to be growing up?

Jinks: I wanted to be a nice person, and that's my same wish today. I had no idea what career I wanted to enter. At the end of the whole thing, I hope people who are interested will say Jill tried really hard to do her best, and she got it right every now and then.

I have a saying that I live by. (Atlanta Braves slugger) Chipper Jones is a Stetson guy, and I love baseball. He asks how it's possible to be unsuccessful two out of three times and still be a hero. There's always the hope that this will be the one time.

Womenetics: What traits do you look for when hiring employees?

Jinks: I look for a sense of humor and a sense of self and humility. They should be comfortable with failure, love themselves first, and be comfortable working in a consensus environment where everybody gets richer, not just one person. I look for people who are passionately and authentically engaged in community service because everybody wins in that situation. I want people who are respectful of themselves and others.

Womenetics: What advice can you give Womenetics readers?

Jinks: If you accept that it's all out there, then the hunt is a lot easier. There will always be people who will help you. Sometimes you won't know the person's name or the reason. I believe 99 percent of us are good people, and 100 percent of that 99 percent want to help you. So get over yourself, ask politely, and let others help you.