

30% CLUB JAPAN INVESTOR GROUP INTERVIEW SERIES VOL2

Interview with Junko Okawa : Building a Company Where Women Can Succeed

GSAM Okawa-san, you started your career as a cabin attendant and then became the first female representative director of Japan Airlines (JAL). Which of your skills and experience do you think were evaluated by the company? Also, what motivated you to rise to your current position?

Okawa I became a director of the company immediately after we experienced bankruptcy. At that time, the mission of management was to determine what needed to be reviewed and what reforms to pursue. I think a key factor in accomplishing this mission was frontline experience. People working on the frontline can offer clues or tips for solving problems and come up with new ideas that can only be gained through firsthand experience. Putting their feedback to use was vital for rebuilding JAL. Moreover, until then, the position of General Manager of the Cabin Attendants Division was assigned to male employees without any experience as a cabin attendant. The role expected of me was to conceive new concepts and ideas that could not be derived through conventional logic-based discussions and to ensure that JAL moved forward. I assumed the position with a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to this mission.

GSAM When you were faced with challenges in your career, how did you overcome them? Did the company support you in achieving work-life balance?

Okawa To balance work and family life, I built a supportive network of friends and family. As a cabin attendant, I worked irregular hours which involved staying overnight. Until my child turned one, I used the company's system of working shorter flight hours and chose flight patterns without an overnight stay. In the meantime, I prepared myself in my work and personal life to return to international flight duty. Although it was not a normal child-rearing environment, I was encouraged by my child's nursery school principal, who said that each person can have his or her own style of childcare.

GSAM Could you tell us about JAL's programs to support female employees in developing their careers and acquiring skills?

Okawa The JAL D&I Lab (formerly known as JAL Nadeshiko Lab) is JAL Group's program to address diversity and inclusion across organizations through a bottom-up approach. In this program, one to two

employees from each Group company voluntarily join the Lab to conduct research in groups on themes related to diversity for about nine months. In addition to research, they share their findings and suggestions with the entire JAL Group and deliver presentations at an annual convention to approximately 200 employees. The convention is attended by the directors including the President and Chairperson of the company.

GSAM How can women make their voices heard in the workplace? What do you think female employees should do to demonstrate their abilities more effectively? What part can you play in achieving this?

Okawa In this age of ambiguity and uncertainty, a sense of security through homogeneity is merely staying the same, which in fact means going backwards. A strong message from top management will drive diversity forward. I would like for us to understand different personality types and help every employee grow. During a flight, for example, ten cabin attendants each serve the passengers differently and their synergy effects determine whether overall cabin service is good or not. I would like to give them confidence that their individual diversity plays a significant part in our service.

GSAM In Japan, where the ratio of female directors is low, what do you think is needed in terms of awareness and environment for women to more easily become a director?

Okawa Nowadays, more women are managers than ever before. Still, the number of women in department manager positions, one rank before promotion to an officer, is extremely low. This imbalance is reality. Therefore, we must think of a framework for nurturing female managers who are seen as candidates for department managers, officers, and top management. Awareness will be built in the process. I also feel that we need to rethink excessive consideration given to women workers by men, with the exception of special individual cases. Considerations such as "I don't think you can handle this" or "I don't want to trouble you with this" can stop women from getting ahead. Even if men do not say anything, women can sense their intentions and lose confidence, which in turn impedes diversity. I hope that both men and women speak frankly and openly.

GSAM How is board diversity changing in JAL management? What positive effects do



Junko Okawa

Representative, External Affairs,
Japan Airlines Co., Ltd.

Junko Okawa joined Japan Airlines Co., Ltd. in 1977. After serving as a purser in the International Cabin Attendants Department, an instructor in the Cabin Attendants Training Department, and other positions, she became Vice President of the Inflight Service Department in 2006. Under her leadership as Vice President of the Cabin Service Planning Department in 2007, the Company introduced quantitative evaluation of service. In 2010, she became the first female cabin attendant to be appointed Executive Officer and General Manager of the Cabin Attendants Division. After holding a number of executive positions, namely, Director, Senior Managing Executive Officer and General Manager of the Cabin Attendants Division in 2013, Director and Senior Managing Executive Officer of the Corporate Brand Promotion Department in 2014, Representative Director, Senior Managing Executive Officer and General Manager of the Communications Division in 2016, and Vice Chairperson of the Company in 2018, Okawa was named Representative of External Affairs of the Company in April 2019.

you think diversity has had on board meetings?

Okawa The situation is not ideal yet, but the board members speak more freely than before. As a female director with only frontline experience, my ideas and opinions may have been considered unusual at first. But JAL was in a serious situation immediately after bankruptcy and management was forced to make difficult decisions. There were times I had to fight alone based on my firsthand experience. The directors eventually realized that the success of our measures lay in sensitivity or intuition to see situations as they are, and not in logical reasoning. This led to promoting diversity in the board.

GSAM Do you have any advice for other companies on how to develop female talent and increase the ratio of female managers and directors?

Okawa A bottom-up approach such as the JAL D&I Lab alone is not sufficient to get positive results. Top management must declare and demonstrate their commitment to diversity. It should not be left to directors who are enthusiastic about it, but instead

understood by all directors that diversity is an integral part of management strategy. I feel that repeated messages on diversity by top management are necessary in internal communications.

出典：GSAM

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金融商品取引業者 関東財務局長（金商）第 325 号

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