

THE EXECUTIVE ROSTER: Q&A with Katherine Henderson of Hockey Canada

Interview

In a country where hockey is its identity, Katherine Henderson is carving out a new chapter in the sport's history. As President and CEO of Hockey Canada, Henderson isn't just managing the game—she's shaping its future, making sure that the ice remains a place for every player, every fan, and every Canadian.

Her path to the C-suite wasn't always crystal clear, however. She never expected to become the first woman to take the reins of one of Canada's most storied sports. In fact, Henderson grew up in a town where "girls weren't allowed to play hockey," she says.

Yet, each step in her career—from volunteering at the Canada Summer Games to marketing for major brands—prepared her for this role. "I couldn't have imagined as a little girl that I was ever going to be the president of a hockey association," Henderson tells Korn Ferry. "That [was] not even within the realm of possibility." When the opportunity came around in 2023, she knew she had to take it.

But Henderson wasn't going into a smooth situation following the COVID-19 pandemic. Hockey Canada at the time was dealing with the fallout of a scandal, one where "the public felt very let down by the people that worked at Hockey Canada," Henderson says. "They felt that there had been a coverup," she continues. "They felt that that the people at Hockey Canada prioritized and protected hockey above and beyond everything else."



By the time she arrived, Henderson says, most companies had either paused their sponsorships or withdrawn entirely, and a significant number of staff had departed. "When I came in, the whole board had to resign," she tells Korn Ferry. "The CEO resigned, and the whole C-suite was basically gone."

Henderson knew Hockey Canada had to regain the public's trust—and she stepped into her role to do just that. She had big plans for the organization's future, starting with stabilizing finances after years of deficits and redefining its purpose and values to guide strategic planning.

Looking ahead, Henderson wants to grow the sport and make hockey accessible to all Canadians, regardless of their background or experience. "Everyone who laces up their skates should be able to say, 'There's a place for me in this sport,'" Henderson says. Whether they aspire to join the women's league, play for an Olympic team, or are "a 40-year-old woman who never had the chance to learn how to skate, we should be there to help them," she adds.

In an interview* with Korn Ferry, Henderson reflects on her leadership path, the lessons learned along the way, and her vision for making hockey more inclusive, accessible, and sustainable for generations to come.

Korn Ferry: What inspired you to pursue a career in hockey and what motivated you to accept the position of president and chief executive officer at Hockey Canada?

Katherine Henderson: What motivated me was a career in sports. I came after working in the private sector for a number of years. I was a marketing executive, and I had an opportunity to spend a lot of time with people who worked in sports. And I had a personal view because it was important to me growing up. It was very important to me personally and to my family, but when I started to work in sports, I could see the impact that it had on other people's lives. So, I spent a lot of time playing sports, working alongside sports, and volunteering in sports.

My very first volunteer job was at the 1981 Canada Summer Games in Thunder Bay; I was still in high school at the time. But in 2010, I had the opportunity to go work for the Toronto 2015 Pan American and Parapan American Games, and I was one of the executives there. I knew [the Pan American and Parapan American Games] was going to change our city, and I could see that. At the time, I thought this was something I was going to do for a few years. But once I was on the inside of sports, I knew I was never going to leave.

Korn Ferry: [Korn Ferry research](#) highlights the importance of emotional intelligence and adaptability in leadership during a crisis. You stepped into your role during a time of heightened scrutiny. How did you approach building trust and establishing a clear vision for the organization since taking on the role?

Henderson: Hockey in Canada is incredibly important to Canadians. It isn't just a sport. It is our national winter sport, and it's a sport that most Canadians highly identify with. It's kind of part of our national DNA. Probably hockey and national health care are the two things that when we travel around the globe, people know us for. Hockey Canada had been through a rough time, and it went beyond an organization.

This was the public trust for hockey in Canada, and people felt incredibly let down by it, and Canadians had a relationship with Hockey Canada. It's not transactional. It's part of their identity. It's part of the way they think about themselves. So, coming into an organization like this, what you have to do is spend time listening. You have to listen to the people that that you have that relationship with and figure out what they want that relationship to be and where it can be improved.

This is all the people with Hockey. These are hockey participants, hockey fans, employees of Hockey Canada, Sponsors, marketing partners, and our member organizations. We're an amateur Athletic Association and some of the things that had happened affected a lot more people than just Hockey Canada. So, the first part is to figure out what people want from us. And then you just keep checking in.

Korn Ferry: Drawing from your previous leadership experience, what key lessons have you carried with you into your current role, and which have proven most valuable in navigating this challenge?

Henderson: When I was working at the Pan American and Parapan American Games, I was one of the very first employees. One of the things they had was a vision of what the city wanted and what the politicians wanted, but what they wanted was lots of engagement from the people who these games were supposed to serve. Those were Canadians, Ontarians, and people who lived in the local communities, particularly young people and who come from Pan American countries. We were looking at communities that were relatively diverse.

[I was] armed with a bid book, pad of paper, and a really good researcher. I had the ability to go out and say, "What do you want your city to look like? And how can these games help you? How do you want to be involved with the games? How would these games make your life better?" We asked these questions right at the beginning, and at that point, we got to design the games based on that. That was a huge lesson for me.

The games came in under budget, we sold more tickets and had higher broadcast [numbers], sold more merchandise, and had more attendance than any games ever. They felt like they were Olympic and Paralympic in scale. One of the questions people asked was, “Why were they so successful?” And I always said, “I asked people what they wanted, and that was just what we delivered. We just continued to deliver that. And every time we got to a place where we were a little bit unsure, we [would] just go back to those communities and say, ‘What is it that you’re looking for, and how can we serve you?’”

That’s a huge lesson, and it’s so true. You make them a promise, and [if] you keep that promise, they buy in. With Hockey Canada, you have to bring that thinking and mindset in all the time.

Korn Ferry: Your appointment is also a historic one for Hockey Canada. How do you see this milestone influence the future of hockey in Canada, particularly for women and girls involved in the sport?

Henderson: Yes, it was historic, and I was pretty adamant [that] I wanted to be the right person. I don’t want to be picked because I’m a [woman], but I’ve also worked in sports in fairly senior roles on an ongoing basis. I do believe in, “See it, be it.” When I was a little girl, I grew up in Thunder Bay, Ontario. It’s like a hockey Mecca, and it’s produced tons of NHL players and [other] really good hockey players. Everyone I knew played hockey—except the girls because the girls weren’t allowed to play. ... So, it was kind of historic for me as well. It was personally historic.

That being said, women’s hockey is growing, and we have great teams. I happened to be walking in right before the Professional Women’s Hockey League (PWHL) was launched, and it’s been unbelievably successful in Canada. It has a broadcast deal, sponsors, and quality hockey. It is worldclass. And one of the things that we did right away was look at how we grow the game. It was very clear to me that growing women’s hockey is a no-brainer. There was a ton of pent-up demand.

We’ve also just [published a paper studying all Canadians](#), asking “What do we do as Canadians to make sure that every little girl in Canada who wants to play hockey can play hockey and can have a professional job in hockey if that’s what they want?” That’s a big, existential question. The paper is out there right now, [and] we are madly researching, interviewing, and doing all these things with all these groups to come up with a set of recommendations, and then we have to go and do them.



Katherine Henderson of Hockey Canada

Korn Ferry: [Korn Ferry research](#) reveals that women CEOs often work harder and navigate more roles, industries, and functions than their male counterparts to reach the C-suite. How have you managed these kinds of expectations and challenges throughout your career?

Henderson: I started my career in a very traditional female role. I worked as a therapeutic and clinical dietician at a children's hospital, and I went back to school and did an MBA. There were things that I needed to do that proved [to] everyone that [I was] little bit more than the person sitting next to me. All that being said, I also want to say I had lots of really good male mentors and people who helped me in my career as well.

[When] I was working in packaged goods, I was going up through marketing, and I was having children at the time, too. I had to be super crisp and clear about what my expectations were when I was leaving for maternity leave, then coming back and holding people accountable to that. I realize there's a business that has to keep going, and I completely get it. But you know there were types of roles I was looking for upon my return, and my expectation was that I've done the work, and I put in the work. And that's what I was going to get when I came back.

The other thing that I did often that helped me move up was take on unpopular assignments. I worked in places with these big global brands, and everyone wanted to work on a fancy brand, which I got an opportunity to do. But often I found myself quite attracted to brands that were struggling, or there was a big issue with them, and they weren't nearly as fun. They weren't as funded. They weren't as resourced. They often were losing money. They were losing distribution. Show me a good thorny problem, and I'm immediately interested in it. And so often I was finding that's where I was moving up. Keeping a good thing going is a real skill, but taking something that isn't going very well, making it run smoothly, growing it, and adding value are different skills.

Korn Ferry: Are there any people or structures that you sought out, that helped you kind of navigate the challenges that come with heightened expectations on women, especially as you got into more senior leadership? Is there anything that you would recommend to someone following that career trajectory?

Henderson: I am, embarrassingly, always trying to learn something. I'm constantly signing up for courses, and sometimes, they're just things that I'm curious about and interested in. But often when I see something that is part of an issue, I take it upon myself to study it and see it not just from "how's this affecting the sales of my brand?" but "what is really the problem here?"

So, I've taken courses on leadership at the University of Chicago on new technologies and new ways of solving problems. I've certainly done those types of things. But when you talk about sports, there's a number of things like our Truth and Reconciliation Commission—that helps us reconcile with our indigenous people. As we've come to colonize Canada, we've caused harm to other people.

At first, I looked at the problem and said, "What do I need to do?" I was looking at a list of things to do, and I thought, "That's not really good enough." I need to really understand what the issues are. What were the root causes of these issues? How did they come about? Because if I'm part of the issue, I need to be part of the solution, too. I took a bunch of courses at the University of Alberta called Indigenous Canada, and it helped me in understanding I'm part of a problem, and that some of the things that I do in my work and some of the structures that are in my work are also part of the problem. Understanding what that is also helps to solve the problem. It isn't like I said, "Oh, I did an executive MBA. And everything just turned around." I did do an MBA, but years and years ago, I felt like I hadn't finished my university career.

I have a degree in science, and I also have one in business. And I realized I probably hadn't taken courses where I had to really write out critical thinking and articulate difficult problems and difficult concepts and put together an approach.

Korn Ferry: What advice would you give to women aspiring to lead in sports or other male-dominated industries?

Henderson: When I started in business, I was one of a handful of women. I wasn't the only one, but we were just starting to make our way into ... into management positions. I don't think young women are like this as much anymore, but early on for me, I was watching my male counterparts, and I was trying to behave like them. I was trying to emulate them. I remember at one point thinking, "I'm sort of pretending to be someone I'm not. I have a way of approaching things, I have a personality, and I have a perspective. And this is getting really exhausting. I just need to be myself. This is the way I think, this is the way I feel, and this is the way I lead." And all of a sudden, my career path started to accelerate. I was spending so much less energy worrying about how I was going to say something than the content of what it was that I wanted to say. I was able to do things faster and more effectively. And I could bring people along.

I don't mind being a leader that steps behind someone and lets them shine. I started to realize, I have this great power of being able to pick super smart people who know what they're doing and nurture them into roles where they do well. And I just started doing a lot of that. So, I would say, be yourself. Stay curious. Find people who want to see you do well and have lots of good, healthy conversations. Also never forget, even if you're a junior person, you can always help the person that's helping you. Never forget to ask that. Don't be afraid to take on an ugly problem. If you think you can solve the ugly problem, solve it. You're a lot more heroic from taking something from 0 to 8 than you are at maintaining a 9.

Korn Ferry: Is there any initiative or project that you've been a part of, or that you're currently a part of that you're particularly proud of?

Henderson: Gosh! I'll tell you a story. This is the Pan American and Parapan American Games. I had a really incredible moment there because they were really successful. They exceeded everything that we set out to do. A big part of it, though, that a lot of people don't realize is that when you're building games, you're doing a lot of city building. The games are sort of like an explanation for the fact that a whole bunch of waterfront was redeveloped in Toronto, we finally had a downtown to airport train link, we had tested HOV lanes, and we had built a bunch of really sorely needed facilities like Olympic pools and velodromes—things that to this day have brought a lot of sports tourism money into local areas that lie around the greater Toronto area.

I was really proud, and I remember I was with one of my friends. It was the very last day of the Pan American and Parapan American Games, and I had made a promise to the Paralympic Committee President that the celebration would be bigger and better than anything he'd ever seen at a Pan American and Parapan American Games, and we had to shut down two streets in Toronto. We did it outdoors, and there were so many people that came down. You couldn't get near the venue, the Para athletes were coming into the parade, there were so many people out there just cheering them on, and then fireworks were going off. It was one of those moments where my friend said, "I feel really sad like this is all over." And I said, "Actually, I don't feel sad at all. I feel really happy right now. Everything that we said we were going to do, we did it. I want to go on with the next thing. I don't want to keep living in this thing." I tend to be quite a goal-oriented person. And when that stuff happens it exhilarates me. I'm really proud, but I don't want to keep living in the past. I don't want to kind of keep reliving that moment over and over again. I say, let's create some new moments.

Korn Ferry: Is there anything that you want to add or share with us?

Henderson: I'll share this, I don't think I don't know a lot of organizations that do succession planning very well. It's probably the number one risk that most of us have, me included. I get a little bit caught up on trying to make a lot of things right now and in the future. But you often forget [to ask], "Is this sustainable?" I've started over the last couple of years to recognize that a key role of executives is to have little enough ego to say, "I'm not irreplaceable, and because I'm not irreplaceable, find someone to replace me." And when you do that, you increase your own value. You start to have a really smart team of people around you, because if you're picking people that see the vision and want to get there, they really accelerate a lot of things.

**This interview has been edited for clarity and length.*

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