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Coker now leading KY Center for Leadership

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Greg Coker

Submitted

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Greg Coker has come full circle. Now he's looking to broaden that circle across the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

Coker, a Franklin native and a protege of Kentucky Center for Leadership co-founder Randall Capps, was selected in May as the new president and CEO of that

nonprofit that Capps and Cecile Garmon founded in 2020 as a vehicle for leadership development throughout Kentucky.

“Both (Capps and Garmon) were mentors of mine and former professors of mine,” Coker said. “The first class I had (at Western Kentucky University) in 1982 was speech communication with Dr. Capps.

“He was a major influence in what I studied.”

Coker studied speech communication and psychology as an undergraduate at WKU and later earned a master’s degree in organizational communications.

He parlayed that academic background into a career that has included a stint as commissioner of the Kentucky Public Service Commission and executive roles at three different Fortune 500 companies.

Most recently, Coker has worked as an independent consultant to such businesses and organizations as

General Motors, Houchens Industries, Vanderbilt University, and the Kentucky League of Cities.

He has authored three books, including a “Soft Skills Field Manual” text that is used by many organizations to teach the human relations attributes needed to succeed in the workplace. A fourth book, “Pillars of the Organization,” is due to be published later this year.

As an established leadership development consultant, Coker wasn't looking for a job when Kentucky Center for Leadership (KCL) board members approached him about facilitating a strategic planning session.

But one thing led to another.

The KCL board of directors was looking for someone to fill the void created by Capps' death in 2022 and saw Coker as the ideal candidate.

“I put some ideas together about taking the organization to the next level,” Coker recalled. “I brought the plan back to the board.”

KCL leaders liked the plan so much that they offered Coker the role of president and CEO.

Coker said his decision was influenced by the story of how John Sculley left his role as president of PepsiCo to help transform the computer industry as CEO of Apple Inc. in its infancy.

“I want to look back and have people say that maybe Greg had a little bit to do with elevating leadership in Kentucky,” Coker said.

Leaders of the KCL board believe Coker made the right decision.

“The Kentucky Center for Leadership was established to make a difference, to empower Kentucky communities with quality leadership that guides healthy change and future success,” said Jim Flynn, current KCL chairman. “Greg’s understanding and embrace of our mission, vision, and purpose will create synergy that advances the cause throughout the commonwealth.”

Craig Browning, immediate past KCL chairman, said having Coker as CEO “will allow us to advance and expand our services and impact to an even broader Kentucky audience.”

Fittingly for someone who started his career path at WKU, Coker and the KCL are housed at the WKU Innovation Campus on Nashville Road.

Innovation Campus CEO Buddy Steen welcomes the new tenant.

“Greg is a thought leader, an author and a mentor who brings talented people together,” Steen said. “I thought it would be a great fit to have someone like that on site.”

Coker said the Innovation Campus is a great launching pad for the trainings and seminars he plans to conduct as he aims for KCL to be “a catalyst for next-level leadership.”

Toward that goal, Coker brought together on May 30 at WKU’s Eva and Jim Martens Alumni Center more than 120 business, government and

nonprofit leaders for the first of four Executive Leadership Luncheon events planned for this year.

Those luncheons and a series of CEO roundtables, workshops and other events are in the works as Coker aims to develop leaders first in southcentral Kentucky and later throughout Kentucky.

“What I’m doing now is getting people excited about our opportunities and letting people know what we’ve done and what we’d like to do and get them on board with us.”

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