

The Three Ps

An Interview with Beata Kirr, Chief Impact Officer, The Copia Group

EDITORS' NOTE *Beata Kirr is a member of The Copia Group's (TCG) Investment Committee and is primarily responsible for delivering a distinctive impact investing platform and establishing TCG as a thought leader in impact private markets. Kirr joined Bernstein Private Wealth Management in 2007 as a Senior Investment Strategist, became Head of Core Strategies in 2017, Co-Head of Investment Strategies in 2020, and Co-Head of Investment & Wealth Strategies in 2022, overseeing a \$100 billion investment platform. Prior to her time at Bernstein, Kirr also held leadership positions at Aurora Investment Management and Goldman Sachs. Kirr first came to the United States from the former Soviet Union with her family as political refugees during the Cold War. After graduating from The Wharton School with a BS degree in economics, Kirr went on to receive an MBA in finance and marketing from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.*



Beata Kirr

FIRM BRIEF *The Copia Group (copiagroupllc.com) is a diverse-owned investment advisor that provides debt and equity capital solutions to privately held, lower middle-market companies. TCG seeks to turn critical challenges into high-return opportunities that deliver impact and scale and believes that full inclusion provides the greatest long-term value for its clients and communities.*

How did your presence at The Copia Group come to be?

I was sitting at a dear friend's funeral in the spring of 2022. She was only 47 and her death was too sudden. That, combined with three years of the lived COVID experience and a nasty bout of shingles, made me think long and hard about the choices we make in our lives and, especially, how we spend our time at work. So, after a 16-year run at a private wealth firm, where I was most recently the Co-Chief Investment Officer overseeing \$100 billion of private client assets, I started building a clear vision for the next phase of my career, which I labeled the "Three Ps" – a combination of Passion, Purpose, and Private Markets investing.

In my prior role, I always enjoyed the process of building and disrupting – thinking

around corners for what was next on the investment horizon, and how to bring that evolution to our clients. I was proud of what I had built and how much I had changed the offering set. One of the biggest changes was the creation of a suite of impact investing strategies. The movement to incorporate Environmental, Social and Governance factors into the traditional risk-return discussion grew exponentially in the last seven years, and I loved participating in that work.

I also came to realize that investing in private markets like private equity, venture capital or private credit often proved to be much more rewarding than public market investing, for those that qualified for the risks and liquidity trade-offs. And these markets seemed better primed for true impact investing outcomes.

So, it was in that moment in the spring of 2022, I realized that this combination of impact and private markets is where I wanted to focus my efforts in the back half of my career. It was unfortunately not going to be possible to do that within the comfortable and well-worn seat I was in, so I started exploring options to specialize in those Three Ps – a scary proposition to leave the great position at a great firm in order to pursue my passion.

With a 20-year history of friendship with Shundrawn Thomas, I shared my aspirations with him, and they resonated perfectly with his own ambitions and values. It was a meeting of the minds at the perfect time in the universe, as a few weeks after our conversation, Shundrawn

made a significant decision to depart from his executive leadership role and establish The Copia Group.

Whether we call it fate, or incredibly good timing, our individual career journeys ended in the exact same place at the exact same time, and many months of discussions later, I was thrilled to join Shundrawn as the Chief Impact Officer of The Copia Group.

Will you provide an overview of your role and areas of focus?

I am the Chief Impact Officer. I would start by saying Chief Impact Officer is a title I envisioned, thinking a lot about what it meant and what it conveyed. It is not common in the industry yet, but I believe it soon will be, as companies pivot from viewing ESG as a siloed risk management exercise to understanding that future profit success recognizes stakeholder capitalism, where organizational impacts, both direct and indirect, will inevitably come to the forefront as business-critical imperatives. At the Aspen Institute ESG Conference recently, a prominent industry sustainability leader stated that the Chief Impact Officer will, in fact, become the most important new role of the future. I look forward to that trend.

So, what does a Chief Impact Officer do, exactly? In this role, I am focused on four primary areas of responsibility:

1. Establishing an impact framework and repeatable impact measurement process for our investments.

2. Acting as a voting member of our Investment Committee, assessing our potential investments through an impact lens.

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3. Thought leadership on the social impact issues of the day that are important to The Copia Group in our mission to narrow the wealth gap for under-represented populations in the U.S.

4. Engagement with community. Community is broadly defined as potential investors who are interested in our approach, but also the broader impact investing community at large and our physical community through our philanthropic engagement efforts over time.

How critical is it for the role of Chief Impact Officer to be engaged in business strategy?

The first thing I’d say here is that all companies have an impact – both negative and positive – on the world around them. The question is how much they notice and/or incorporate that impact into their daily business or investing assessments. Copia’s strategy is focused on providing capital for inclusive-minded business owners, whether they are diverse or recognize they need to make progress in their employee or customer base on this front. We would argue that all businesses have a responsibility to create inclusive environments with psychological safety for their employees, recognizing different starting points and comfort levels integrating into that workplace’s culture. We would also argue that businesses recognize that changing demographics mean a changing consumer for their products/services. Both the inside viewpoint on inclusivity and the outside viewpoint on inclusivity are mission-critical to business success, so yes, I would argue that the time has come to no longer have positions that are focused on ESG and/or DEI assessment “off to the side.” The time is now to incorporate those lenses into business risk and opportunity assessments because, without employees and clients, there is not much business strategy to focus on.

How critical is it for leading companies to build diverse and inclusive workforces to bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the table when making business decisions?

It’s extremely critical. At The Copia Group, we believe that full inclusion provides the greatest long-term value for our clients and communities. And it’s not just here that

we believe it. There is plenty of research that has been cited, including seminal surveys by McKinsey & Company, that highlight the higher profitability that is experienced by companies with diverse leadership teams and diverse workforces. It makes intuitive sense for workforces to represent the increasingly diverse tapestry of our population. Rather than going into our “comfortable” echo chambers, employees and leaders should challenge ourselves to see and hear other’s lived experiences – and learn from them. We do that here at Copia, and we think successful businesses will inherently do the same.

In addition, there is much evidence to show that diverse leadership gives back to their employee base, supply chain, and community through providing important paths to economic mobility and prioritizing access and inclusivity. Again, here, we see that as table stakes for a business owner to be successful.

Do you feel that there are strong opportunities for women to grow and lead in finance?

It’s not a question of the opportunities presenting themselves. It’s a question of the pipeline being there and staying in the game long enough to realize them. There are huge challenges that stand in women’s way. My daughter was born at the market peak, in September 2007, and the ensuing 18-month period was one of the hardest of my life. Not only was the market decline a terrifying time for private clients to experience, but because of the demands of that unusual time, in particular, I gave up a lot of time with our kids early on due to extensive travel and long evening work commitments. It was simply what was required to deliver the best outcomes possible at that moment.

Those tradeoffs ultimately paid off for me at my prior firm. I felt fortunate to have the opportunity and be able to “lean in,” but that’s not only because of my work efforts, but because I had a village of support surrounding me in my amazing husband, my parents nearby, and trusted caregivers. Not everybody has that support network, and not every couple agrees to the trade-offs required to make it to the top. There is no question of the tradeoffs. They are

very real – and many women aren’t willing to make them – especially if their spouse is in a demanding career as well.

So, it’s not really a lack of opportunities in the industry that is the problem. For those who choose to lean in, though, it is still hard to make it to the highest levels of investment responsibility. The facts remain overwhelmingly negative. The most recent Knight Foundation study showed that only 1.4 percent of the portfolio managers in America were ethnically or gender diverse – 1.4 percent. That is crazy. I certainly have worked with many talented women that could fill those roles, but for a variety of reasons, they either drop out or don’t get there.

I have hope that this reality can change as there is more willingness to provide career flexibility, and working remotely provides a much-needed option to be more present for working parents. In addition, there are more “pipeline” programs, attracting girls to STEM and demystifying the acronym-filled world of finance. I see the change afoot and I am optimistic for the future.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

I have always had the mindset of a learner, so I don’t necessarily think of myself as somebody who should be doling out advice, but I’m always more than happy to share what I’ve learned with others.

The first thing I’d say is to be a constant learner. It’s critical to be good at your job, and be known for being good at your job, but I’ve found that “staying in my lane” hasn’t benefited me. I have never hesitated to ask tough questions and question the status quo. Ask why things are done the way they are if you don’t think that’s the best way of doing them. If you have a solution, propose it. Leaders love employees that come with solutions to the problems they’re identifying, so be that person that identifies both the challenge – and the solution. No matter your title or your age, your ideas matter and speaking up for them is a critical skill for long-term success.

Also, a mentor and manager of mine reminded me often that careers are a marathon, not a sprint. I was often impatient about the “next thing,” and sometimes, just doing a great job at your job, building your brand and reputation, takes time and lots of repetition. Patience is a virtue that can be well-rewarded over time.

Last, I would say that, reflecting upon my current change – which is the biggest risk and biggest change I’ve ever taken in my career – to launch a firm from the ground up – don’t be afraid of change. It’s scary to do something different and leave your comfort zone, but if we’re not doing something that makes us want to throw up, usually we’re not growing and learning. Just like working out requires pain to make progress, so does growing up professionally. Being uncomfortable is really uncomfortable, but learning to embrace that is a skill that we should all welcome to further our professional development. ●