

CHAIRMAN AND CEO, CORNING INCORPORATED

As CEO of Corning Incorporated, Wendell Weeks manages to celebrate the company's 163-year history while keeping razor-sharp focus on the future. Although the products have changed over the years—from the glass bulbs for Thomas Edison's electric light to the cover glass in Apple's iPhones—Weeks sees a steady pattern of innovation paired with an old-fashioned commitment to values. →

WENDELL P. WEEKS MBA 1987



Clockwise, from top left:
Weeks at an employee awards lunch; with his wife, HBS sectionmate Kim Frock; with his son, Porter, at the Corning Museum of Glass.

TIMELINE

- 1959 Born, Reno, Nevada
- 1981 Earns BS, Accounting, Lehigh University
- 1983 Joins Corning
- 1987 Earns MBA
- 2001 Named President, Corning Optical Communications
- 2002 Named President and COO, Corning
- 2005 Named CEO, Corning
- 2007 Named Chairman, Corning
- 2007 Corning markets Gorilla Glass
- 2013 *Fast Company* names Corning one of World's 50 Most Innovative Companies



“If you are going to continue to make a difference, you have to learn new things all the time.”

It was these values that first appealed to Weeks when he arrived at Corning as a Price Waterhouse consultant after graduating from Lehigh University. “I was impressed with the people and what the company stood for,” he recalls. The feeling was mutual: Corning asked him to join its corporate control group. Two years later, on the eve of his departure to attend HBS, Weeks was called into the office of CEO Jamie Houghton (MBA 1962). As Weeks tells it, Houghton, whose storied family had run the company since 1851, asked him to return to Corning after HBS. “I shook his hand and said yes. And here I am, 28 years later.” That simple moment launched Weeks’s career, and it also had a deep impact on Corning’s future as a successful innovator in materials science.

The first in his family to go to college, Weeks thrived at HBS. The case method—“pretend doing,” as he calls it—gave him a way to test out leadership skills without consequences. “HBS taught me the most important skill: to learn,” he says. Also at Soldiers Field, he managed to sit next to Kim Frock (MBA 1987) on his first day. The pair, who found they had much in common, will soon celebrate their 25th anniversary.

Upon returning to Corning, Weeks held a series of positions that helped him understand the complexities of the company—from shift supervisor in a manufacturing plant, to new product development, to business development. Weeks, a quick study, has 26 patents pending despite a lack of formal science training. A good salesman who understands business, he distills complicated ideas down to their essence, and, as one colleague put it, possesses “a forward-looking vision.”

Named a vice president in 1996, Weeks ran the company’s optical communications division and invested heav-

ily in the technology, riding the tech boom and providing the fiber cables that brought the Internet into millions of homes in the 1990s. Like so many companies, Corning was caught by surprise when the telecommunications bubble burst. Its stock tumbled, from more than \$100 to about a dollar per share. “That was the darkest time in Corning’s history,” says Weeks.

Jamie Houghton once again called Weeks into his office, and the younger man braced himself to be demoted by his mentor. But Houghton, like Weeks, believes in learning from failure. “His basic theory was, ‘if you broke it, you fix it,’” says Weeks, who was able to do exactly that, bringing Corning back from the brink of failure through a painful restructuring and commitment to both innovation and the diversification of its product lines. “We make products that change the world,” he says, noting Corning’s development of LCD glass; tools to facilitate drug discovery; clean-air technologies; and Corning Gorilla Glass, the scratch-resistant, lightweight cover glass that is now used in nearly 3 billion devices around the world.

An imposing figure at 6 feet 5 inches, with a confident gait and a winning record, Wendell Weeks is surprisingly open about his own self-doubt. “In any given day, there are moments when I am a good leader and there are moments when I am not,” he admits. Having devoted his entire career to Corning—both the company and the small town where it sits on the Chemung River—Weeks’s success is hard to miss, whether measured in employee satisfaction, innovation, shareholder return, or the many local causes he supports. What matters most to him is people. “As individuals, we have very little meaning,” he observes. “We find our meaning through how we serve others and our relationships.”