

2017 Powered by Women

From reader nominations, DBusiness selected eight professional women who are driving growth in Michigan, the nation, and the world.

PROFILES BY DAN CALABRESE, NORM SINCLAIR, GARY WITZENBURG, ILENE WOLFF // PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENNY RISHER

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Tricia Ruby

CEO • Ruby and Associates, Bingham Farms

Employees: 40 • Revenue: \$7.3M



An industrial engineer by training, Tricia Ruby didn't have much interest in working for her father, David Ruby, who in 1984 launched Ruby and Associates, a structural engineering firm in Bingham Farms. Instead, she pursued a challenging opportunity in Atlanta before taking some time off to be a stay-at-home mother raising three boys.

In her early 30s at the time, the last thing she envisioned was coming home to the Detroit area and going to work at the family business. Then her phone rang. "I got a phone call that there was a financial issue with the company," Ruby says. "The financial manager had embezzled a bunch of money."

When she arrived in Detroit she began the work of untangling the company's financial issues, taking on the roles of COO and CFO. Over the course of five years, she helped turned around the business — but, along the way, she recognized that the company had taken

on a toxic environment.

After reading *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, by Patrick Lencioni, Ruby began to recognize that Ruby and Associates was suffering from all the dysfunctions described in the book, particularly a lack of trust between employees and management. She desperately wanted to see the solutions described in the book implemented. "I thought, 'We're never going to survive unless we made sure all of this happens.' "

She got her chance to make a change in 2011, when a difficult decision was made to replace another family member as CEO, and Ruby was asked to take over the top spot.

At first she wasn't sure if the employees would accept her, since she wasn't a structural engineer. "I was really worried about that," she recalls.

But acceptance turned out to be no problem. In fact, Ruby won over the company's employees by quickly making moves to address the trust issue. The changes she made might seem rudimentary, but their impact was huge. "I basically redesigned our company update meeting — what that looked like, and the information that was shared," Ruby says. "I let people have a voice in what was shared, asking them, 'What do you want to know?'"

She also began implementing the steps recommended in Lencioni's book. "If you read that book, the foundation of any team is trust," says Ruby, who earned her industrial engineering degree from Purdue University and obtained a master's degree in manufacturing management from Kettering University in Flint. "We had really open discussions about people in the company, and people's roles here."

The dysfunction now seems like a distant memory to Ruby, who is focused on smart growth — but not necessarily the pursuit of big numbers designed to impress people. And although the company is on solid ground today, the impact of the 2008-2009 recession still lingers with Ruby, and she's determined not to forget the lessons of that period.

"We've experienced great growth over the last couple of years, and (we landed) big projects for some large clients," she says, "but we don't have to be a \$20 million business for me to feel like we're successful. We're successful because we do great work."

Away from the business, one of Ruby's passions is supporting families that have been touched by autism. She is vice chairwoman of the board at Judson Center, a nonprofit organization in Royal Oak that serves families dealing with autism and other mental health issues. "One of my closest friends has two boys with autism, and Judson's work has really touched my heart," Ruby says.

She is also the national chairwoman of the American Council of Engineering Companies (ACEC)/Michigan Small Firms Council, and a member of the ACEC Tax and Regulatory Committee. The latter activity, she says, is partly inspired by the struggles her father sometimes had running the company.

"Business leaders need to understand the business side," Ruby says. "Most of the people I'm dealing with are practitioners. It's a structural engineer running a structural engineering firm. But what they really need to do is learn how to run a business. That's one thing my dad never focused on and, because of that, he had some bad outcomes. I don't want anyone to go through what my dad went through."

— *Dan Calabrese*