

Learning to Lead

INTERVIEW BY GEOFF WEISENBERGER

Ruby+Associates' president and CEO Tricia Ruby didn't expect to work for the firm her father started. But now she runs it, complementing its engineering expertise with her business and leadership know-how.

WHEN TRICIA RUBY decided to go to Purdue University, which is well-known for its engineering program, she went with the explicit intent of not being an engineer.

Her plan didn't go so well, and she eventually ended up graduating with a degree in industrial engineering.

She also didn't intend to ever work for her father, Dave Ruby, the founder of one of the country's top structural engineering firms, Ruby+Associates.

That plan also didn't quite work out, and she eventually went to work for her father—and now she runs the company. And she loves it.

Funny how when things don't go according to plan, they sometimes end up working out for the best.

In a recent conversation with Tricia, we discussed her management philosophy, how math has been a constant theme in her life, what it's like working with her father, and more.

What did you want to be when you were growing up?

I dreamt of being an Olympic sprinter and a soccer player—not really a career path that was available to me. And I loved math, but I didn't think a lot about the “What do you want to be?” question. I remember when I was a senior in high school, and that's when that question started coming up, and I was like, oh, am I



supposed to know that? I thought that was really overwhelming. I remember thinking that I wasn't going to be an engineer. I wasn't going to be my dad. I was going to be the opposite, whatever that was. I actually went to Purdue *not* to be an engineer. I got accepted to the liberal arts college. I had no idea what I was going to be and, of course, I was going to the university that graduates the most engineers in the country, which I maybe didn't really realize at the time. And I asked my dad, “Why did you send me off to this university that graduates so many engineers knowing I wasn't planning to be an engineer?” And he said, “Well, I knew you'd come around.” His approach was never “Thou shalt be an engineer.” I think he knew that probably wouldn't have been the right strategy, but he knew I loved math. And he told me, “You always asked, ‘Why?’ every time I helped you with homework. You didn't want to just know the answer; you wanted to know *why*

it was the answer. That's how engineers think.” Math was my favorite subject for my entire life—like I would make up long division problems as a kid. I didn't have a math class my first semester in college, and it almost broke me. I went to my counselor about three weeks in and told him I didn't know what to do without a math class, but I was already taking too many credits, and I couldn't get into a math class until the following semester. So that's what started me on the path to transferring into engineering. I ended up studying industrial engineering, and I was interested in human factors engineering. I'm left-handed, and the world isn't designed for left-handed people. And so the whole idea of human factors and how design affects different people was really what got me interested in industrial engineering.

And industrial engineering is focused really on manufacturing. I love manufacturing and was a manufacturing engineer



Field Notes is *Modern Steel Construction's* podcast series, where we interview people from all corners of the structural steel

industry with interesting stories to tell. Listen in at modernsteel.com/podcasts.

after graduation. Now, when I talk to fabricators, they're manufacturers, so I feel totally at home visiting clients in a fab shop. I love the smell and look of a plant. I feel at home there.

I'm wondering if any time you walk into a fabrication shop, you start thinking about how you would lay it out.

That's definitely how my brain works. It's how I think when I walk up to a buffet. I think about the flow of people and how they can most efficiently be moved along. I do the same thing at airports. I think about that kind of thing everywhere I go. If I'm in a fab shop, I'm looking at the flow of material and the inventory and the process—I can't get that kind of thinking out of my brain.

Everything, everywhere you go sort of becomes a challenge or a problem to solve! So when did you eventually go to work for your dad at Ruby+Associates?

I didn't think I'd ever work at Ruby+Associates. The company experienced an embezzlement back in the early 2000s. I was staying at home with my first child at the time, and I offered to come home to the Detroit area to help my dad for a couple of weeks. I was living in Atlanta at the time, and I came back pretty much over the Christmas holiday, so that was very convenient, and we were planning on being back here anyway.

I started helping at the company, and probably a month later, I realized that this was going to be the next phase of my life. And I felt like all of my experience in my previous jobs as an industrial engineer really helped prepare me for what I'm doing now in terms of big-picture thinking. I was always a very keenly aware employee, and I always wanted to be a decision-maker. So in any situation that I'm in, I don't feel like it just happened to be that way. Whatever situation you're in is because decisions were made by people for it to be that way. Somebody decided that the chair you're sitting on needed to be a certain way. Somebody decided on the paint color of the hotel room. And I've always thought that if I could be in the room making decisions, then that's where I ultimately wanted to be.

And when it comes to running a company, all of your decisions affect your employees, and I've always been mindful of that. I like to stick to a very employee-centric decision-making process. If it's

something that's better for them, then it's better for the company.

I think that's a good management style. Speaking of which, you're now the president and CEO of Ruby+Associates. What has been the most pleasant surprise about working for a company that your dad started?

There are a couple of things, but the first is just getting to experience my dad from a different perspective. Before I started working here, he was my dad. He was my soccer coach, he was the guy that helped me with my homework, and he was always my biggest cheerleader. Whenever I did poorly on an exam in college, I'd call him, and he'd tell me, "You're going to be fine." He was always very encouraging. But it really wasn't until I started working with him that I realized what an incredible background and résumé he has. Whenever we moved when I was a child, it was always aligned with his career. For example, we came to Chicago, where he worked on the John Hancock and Sears Tower. As a kid, I didn't really get how iconic that was, and I didn't truly appreciate it until I started working with him.

And the other really pleasant surprise, now that I've taken over Ruby, is how much he's trusted me with the company. You'll hear a lot of nightmares of founders that won't go away, or they'll create roadblocks or they'll undermine the next generation, and my dad just hasn't been that guy. He's one of my best employees. He recognized that I bring a different perspective. Obviously, I'm not a structural engineer, but I have a much better business mind, and he really appreciates that and values it and sees the benefits of it.

That sounds like a good, healthy working relationship. How long have you been the president and CEO of Ruby? And what was your first day like in that role?

I've been leading as president and CEO since 2011, but I didn't want the CEO title right away. And a year later, everyone was, like, alright, Tricia, you have to take the title, so I did. And I think that I wanted that year without the title because I was really unsure of the acceptance that I would get as a non-structural engineer. I had the support of our leadership team, but I was

really self-conscious about not having that pedigree. I remember going to an ACEC (American Council of Engineering Companies) meeting, and I'd say, "Well, we're a structural engineering firm, but I'm not a structural engineer," and one of the first people I talked to basically said, "Just so you know, none of us practice anymore. If you're a leader at a larger engineering firm, you're most likely not doing that much design work anymore since there's too much to do on the leadership side." So that made me feel a lot better. Still, I remember feeling like I had a big target on my back—but I think I'm the one who put that target there. I've had nothing but total support from everyone else.

There are a lot of articles out there about leadership, and I feel like courage isn't mentioned nearly enough. If you're putting yourself out there and making decisions every single day, you hope they're the right ones or at least the right ones for what you think is best at that moment. And I think having the courage to put yourself out there is important—the courage to ask for feedback and also the courage to change course if something isn't working. I had an HR consultant friend, and she said those words to me: Leadership takes courage. And when she said that, it changed my entire perspective on what it would take to lead this firm. It's such a simple concept, but I think it's something that I really took to heart and truly believe in. ■

This conversation was excerpted from my conversation with Tricia. To hear more from her, including her thoughts on Detroit, parenting, mentoring, volunteer work, and more, check out the September 2023 Field Notes podcast at modernsteel.com/podcasts.



Geoff Weisenberger
(weisenberger@aisc.org) is
editor and publisher of
Modern Steel Construction.