

2019 HARRY AND DOROTHY GOODELL AWARD

Debra Rodgers

by Emily Holbrook /// Photo by Paul Meyer

Debra Rodgers originally went to college to become a teacher, and after graduation, it was a profession in which she worked for four years. But a lack of job security made her rethink her career path, so she left her Delaware teaching job in 1981 and took a job as legal assistant for a local law firm. This, she said, quickly became another "dead-end job."

Wanting more, Rodgers went back to school to earn her MBA, working in the legal department of CertainTeed Corporation, a Pennsylvania-based building materials manufacturer, while doing so. It was here Rodgers got her first taste of the world of risk management, working closely with the company's risk manager on litigation matters. Eventually, she was recruited to work in the risk management department of Saint-Gobain Corporation, CertainTeed's parent company.

"I knew that's where I wanted to be—even back in 1988," Rodgers said. "And I've been in the risk management profession ever since."

It is her 30 years of success in the industry that earned her this year's Harry and Dorothy Goodell Award, the most prestigious award the Risk and Insurance Management Society (RIMS) bestows upon an individual in the industry. The award, named after Harry Goodell,

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the first president of RIMS, recognizes a person who is furthering the goals of risk management and RIMS through outstanding lifetime achievement.

A LIFE OF RISK MANAGEMENT

At Saint-Gobain, Rodgers managed a nine-member department for the North American operations of French-based Saint-Gobain. Her length of service—from 1988 to 2003—saw her responsibilities increase and position advance, from casualty insurance manager to director of risk management.

As a director, Rodgers was responsible for procuring all insurance and brokerage services, evaluating alternative risk financing options, managing insured claims and insurance run-off related to historical asbestos claims, performing risk management due diligence, and administering all self-insurance programs. During her tenure, she also established and managed a Vermont-based captive insurance company.

In 2003, Rodgers took on the role of vice president of risk management for Aramark Corporation, a Philadelphia-based provider of uniforms and food services to large venues and establishments around the world. She was hired into the company's Executive Leadership Council to lead a nine-person team primarily responsible for risk financing. In 2004, she led a multi-function, multi-level organizational initiative to address the rapidly increasing cost of risk. She identified opportunities to improve the safety function, develop and deploy analytics, and centralize claims. Post-initiative, Rodgers formed a holistic risk management team comprised of safety, risk analytics, insurance procurement and insured claims management initially focused on the company's North American operations.

One of her proudest accomplishments at Aramark was her development of an internal risk analytics team, which gave Rodgers more visibility into the company's risks and costs. The team developed a system to consolidate data from multiple vendors, provide information to help direct risk control activities and to deliver meaningful metrics to measure progress. The risk analytics team also provided external visibility to the company's business partners, including insurers, safety teams and brokers.

"Having an internal risk analytics team showed our partners we were doing something a little different," Rodgers said. "The team we hired built a platform that was applied to multiple areas across the company. It was a robust system beyond risk management."

Rodgers soon realized that implementing a holistic risk team was paying off. Millions of dollars were being saved in insurance program and claims costs—$15 million in the first year, which increased exponentially "after we really got going," she said.

Other accomplishments included building tools, training materials and processes to manage occupational, food and environmental safety. She also hired a team of 23 professionals to manage workers compensation claims and expanded the company's claims team in 2007 to centralize the handling of liability claims.

LESSONS LEARNED

As one would imagine, being in the risk management profession for close to 30 years has taught Rodgers several lessons. And she strongly believes the most important lesson is to continuously evolve as a professional.

"Over the course of my 30 years in the industry, the risk management field evolved significantly," Rodgers said. "It was largely insurance when I first began, but over time it became clear that insurance wasn't enough."

At Aramark, Rodgers saw costs rising and realized that unless the company learned to manage underlying risks, those costs would continue to escalate. Accordingly, her role evolved to encompass safety and risk control. Since she was taking on a new position, she had to seek advice externally about skills needed and people required for the job. She eventually hired 30 people to lead risk control within the company.

"We hired a whole team and they asked, 'where's my data?'" Rodgers said. "We hired an analytics team

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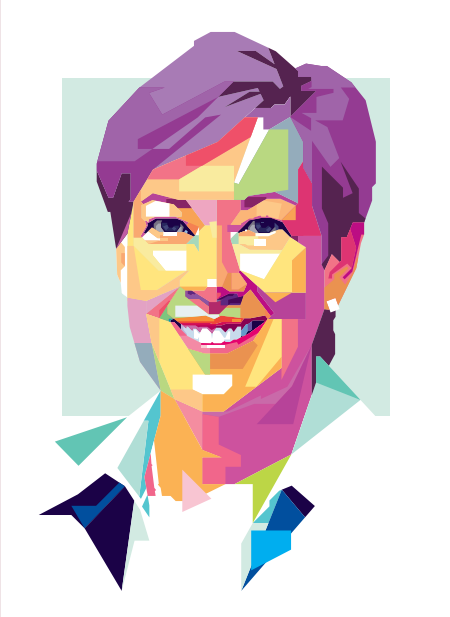
to move from paper data to computerized data so we could understand everything better. This is when it became clear you need to evolve yourself and your organization to meet evolving risks."

The second crucial lesson she learned is to hire the best people. "This seems so intuitive, but I know some professionals are threatened by strong people working under them," she said. "But you have to have the best possible people working under you and develop them. You're not going to move an organization forward without that. It makes sense, but I don't see it a lot."

Rodgers also learned relationships are a critical component of success. In some companies, the risk managers delegate responsibility for insurance renewals to broker partners. But that is something she never believed in. Instead, she feels it is important to attend underwriting meetings every year.

"The underwriters knew me, and I knew them, and we built a trust," Rodgers said. "Where that pays off is when a claim arises. If it's contentious, you can discuss the issues and get the matter resolved without ugly litigation. We had almost no litigation with insurers over the years and that's because we trusted each other."



Communication, both internally and externally, often, and with candor and transparency is another aspect of business Rodgers found to be extremely helpful. Like creating relationships, better communication also resulted in increased trust. "If you communicate internally to your team about the inner workings of what's going on in the company—and externally with business partners—it creates a cohesive team," Rodgers said. "It's crucial."

Lastly, Rodgers found that to be successful as an individual or an organization, you have to continue to add value. Part of that business aspect is selling yourself internally. To do that, she made sure her boss knew how her team was adding value to Aramark.

"It's not about bragging," Rodgers said. "It was about making sure he understood how team members were contributing, and the results associated with those contributions. I would bring team members in and have them talk about initiatives. He would then know them by name, face and contribution. Then when cost-cutting initiatives come up, that's when your team hopefully doesn't get axed."

HELPING GUIDE OTHERS

Rodgers takes pride in both her past and present efforts to guide others. She considers herself a role model and mentor for both men and women within the industry.

"I think what I do translates equally well to men and women, but because of the sheer lack of women in leadership roles in any aspect of a corporation, I ended up becoming a mentor for a lot of different women in all areas of Aramark," she said.

She often found that the way women and men work in an organization differed, an important distinction if you are trying to progress in a male-dominated field. She learned you have to be your true self and make sure your voice is heard.

"I coached a lot of women and I mentored a lot of women," Rodgers said. "I spoke at women's associations within corporations as those were beginning to evolve. The most important thing for women is to try to find their voice."

But it is not only about supporting fellow women in the industry; Rodgers is also passionate about the next generation of risk management and insurance leaders. She has been a guest speaker in the risk management programs at Temple University and Saint Joseph's University, both in Philadelphia.

"It gives people an opportunity to see a female leader and what I have accomplished over the years," Rodgers said. "It's amazing how many students reach out to me following those talks. They want advice on interviewing, resumes and job opportunities."

Rodgers served on the RIMS board from 2003 to 2005 and was also very involved in its Student Advisory Council (SAC). From 2011 to 2014, she served as chair of the SAC, and from 2000 to 2002, she served as chair of the RIMS Education Committee. She also served as

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a member of the Spencer Educational Foundation Risk Manager in Residence program from 2005 to 2007, as a participant in the program from 2015 to 2018, and as a mentor for the Spencer Educational Foundation Scholar Program from 2000 to 2002.

LIFE IN RETIREMENT

Rodgers retired from Aramark last year, but, she is still keeping busy. "My husband gave me the advice to not give any commitments for at least six months," she said. "That was great advice. It provided me time to be with family. I took up regular exercise, which I had not been doing, and I traveled."

Rodgers remains heavily involved at Saint Joseph's and Temple. At Saint Joseph's, she's a board member of the school's Maguire Academy of Insurance and Risk Management. And at Temple, she helps evaluate students' capstone projects during most semesters.

Rodgers feels the outlook for risk management is bright, particularly for young people who have so many opportunities ahead of them. "As my generation retires and as risk gets more broadly defined, the need for risk managers will continue to increase," she said. "When I started there was no cyberrisk, for example. Think of how far we've come and how far the industry will continue to grow." ■

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