

PROFILE

Redcom's Dinah Weisberg learns business from the bottom up

By NICOLE SHELDON

A big transition has taken place at REDCOM Laboratories Inc. The telecommunications company employing 141 people not only celebrated its 40th birthday this year but also inaugurated a new CEO.

Dinah Gueldenpfennig Weisberg is REDCOM's second CEO and third president. She took over as CEO in December 2017. The company's first CEO was her father, Klaus Gueldenpfennig, who founded REDCOM in the family's basement in 1978 with his wife, Brigitte, and five others. Weisberg was 14 at the time and a total tomboy, a trait that has worked to her benefit throughout her career in a traditionally male dominated field.

From climbing trees to tinkering with cars, Weisberg has never been afraid of getting her hands dirty. She officially

Dinah Gueldenpfennig Weisberg

Title: President and CEO, Redcom Laboratories Inc.

Age: 54

Education: B.A., computer science, University at Buffalo; M.S., software development and management, and executive MBA, Rochester Institute of Technology

Home: Webster

Family: Husband, John Weisberg; two French bulldogs

Hobbies: Racecar driving, teaching high-performance driving; gardening, cooking

Quote: "You don't hire smart people so you can tell them what to do. You hire smart people so they tell you what to do."

joined the company roster in 1986 as a stock room employee. From there she dabbled in manufacturing and assembly. While in college she worked in the engineering department before climbing her way through the ranks to where she is today.

REDCOM, a privately owned company, provides communications solutions to clients all over the world including some of the most environmentally challenging areas and for highly secure government agencies such as the Department of Defense.

The first product REDCOM released was the teletraffic generator. It tested calls by automating them from one end to another. Then the company moved into what is known as the switch. The switch is a box that takes an outgoing call and routes it to another location.

"The switches ended up finding a market in compromised areas and environmentally challenging areas because they were very simple and rugged," says Weisberg. "They didn't require fans or air conditioning or anything like that, which was very unusual. But the most important thing about this is that each box was self-contained. You could grow your business by stacking your boxes. As the system got bigger, it made everything more reliable."

The Victor-based company's switches are found all over the world, from Alaska to the South Pacific.

"Our motto was 'sophisticated simplicity,' because it gave you exactly what you needed but didn't do a lot of things that you didn't need," says Weisberg.

The company was hardware-based, but with the advent of IP and technology leaning toward cloud-based solutions, they saw a need to embrace software.

"As technology has evolved and solutions have been driven toward a more software-based solution, we weren't really at the forefront of that because we didn't see the death of the hardware-based platform like some of our competitors did," says Weisberg. "We did, however, develop a virtualized solution."

REDCOM has developed a system of interfaces that are interoperable, meaning the legacy products and virtual products can work hand in hand.

Making this technological shift while maintaining backwards capability for clients has been a tough task, but REDCOM is seeing some of the benefits of that work as experts at the company endeavor to fulfill government specifications, says Mike Sweeney, vice president of government programs and strategy.

"We've found that not only does that meet the developing needs of our customers, but our existing hardware-based platforms in their latest evolution are still highly desirable because they do not depend on the internet to survive," says Weisberg.

For example, if the environment is compromised and there is a power outage or a lack of internet or connectivity, the software-based technology will not work. The legacy platforms, however, will still work under those circumstances.



Photo by Kate Melton

High performance CEO

"As much as some companies are saying that everything is going over the cloud, that's not necessarily true because in some situations—oil platforms" or in the military—"that's just not practical," notes Weisberg.

With clients like the Department of Defense, hacking ability is a major concern. REDCOM's ability to use hardware rather than solely software helps alleviate worry.

Furthermore, everything from concept to manufacturing is done on site at the company's Victor home, which customers appreciate, especially the government. "There's a higher level of confidence in the products we're producing," Sweeney says.

Growing up in the company

Weisberg's father, Klaus Gueldenpfennig, was president and CEO of REDCOM until Sam Delibert became president in 2012. Gueldenpfennig continued to serve as CEO and chairman of the board until retiring from the CEO position in December 2017.

"Dad isn't really all that retired," jokes Weisberg. "He still comes in a couple times a week and attends meetings."

Weisberg's mother, Brigitte Gueldenpfennig, served as vice president of finance and personnel. Her role today is secretary of the board of directors. Dinah used to help her mother in the accounting department before she officially joined the company in 1986.

Weisberg has had a hand in almost every department of the company—she knows REDCOM inside and out. But her titles were not handed to her on a silver platter. In fact, her work experience had humble beginnings.

"My first job was at McDonald's when I was 16," says Weisberg. "Then I would work in programming here on my college breaks. When I began working for REDCOM full time, I would work at clothing stores in the evening. I felt it was important to be on the customer service side of the transaction."

Stepping into this role and having the trust of her employees is by far Weisberg's most significant professional accomplishment to date.

"We're our own harshest critics, and when you grow up in an organization where you're a member of the family, there's always that doubt hanging over your head where you wonder, 'Am I here because of this or am I here because of what I can bring to the table?'" admits Weisberg.

Since stepping into the role of president in January 2017 and then CEO less than a year later, Weisberg has overseen instrumental changes at REDCOM.

"As the new leader of the organization I allowed a lot of

change to happen that seemed to really be necessary from an employee engagement standpoint in terms of autonomy and trust," says Weisberg. "There's a lot more authority within the individual groups to come up with and present solutions to a given challenge. It's about empowering the people to make the right decisions, but of course everything stops at the top."

Sweeney concurs, noting that he does not feel like he needs to check with his superiors every time he is working on a problem. He feels empowered to handle situations himself or with his team.

"Dinah definitely cares about the employees and what's important to them," says Jackie Callari, director of customer engineering and support and a REDCOM employee for 37 years. "But she knows that you can't always do what everybody needs; you also have to consider the financial responsibility of the company. She does a good job of balancing those two."

Weisberg put the company's culture at the forefront when she took over as leader, and to do this she made alterations to the workforce to ensure that the right people were in the right positions. This established mutual trust between Weisberg and her employees because "not only do you have to have people that can really produce, but you also have to trust those people to produce."

Before earning the titles of president and CEO, Weisberg thought she had her management style all figured out. She acknowledges her shortcomings and micromanaging tendencies early on in her leading roles, but she learned recently that the best move for a leader is to hire exceptional employees and then let them do their jobs.

"There's an interesting and relevant quote that I heard that goes, 'You don't hire smart people so you can tell them what to do. You hire smart people so they tell you what to do,'" says Weisberg. "I don't know everything. I know what I know, and I sure as heck know what I don't know. And what I don't know is what other people can bring to the table at the organization. There's not one person that can do everything."

Chris Hasenauer, chief operating officer, notes that the company is having a hard time filling open positions with top-notch individuals.

"The big challenge right now is hiring," says Hasenauer. "The economy is good and we're trying to hire technical folks, and there's a lot of competition for those people."

But REDCOM is in good hands under Dinah's authority. "Dinah has the whole package," says Hasenauer. "She's an engineer, she grew up in the company, she's a racecar driver. She's a great face of the company."

The whole package

Born in Berlin, Weisberg immigrated to the United States with her parents when she was one year old.

Weisberg is truly a Jill of all trades. She is bilingual—German was her first language and she still speaks it at home with her parents. And, as Hasenauer said, Weisberg is a professional racecar driver. At home she gardens and cooks. She does it all.

The Webster resident attended the University at Buffalo and graduated with a bachelor's degree in computer science in 1987. She obtained a master's degree in software development and management at Rochester Institute of Technology in 1997. Just five years after that, Weisberg added an executive MBA from RIT to her belt.

RIT runs in the Gueldenpfennig family. Both of Weisberg's parents have MBAs from RIT, and her father has bachelor's and master's degrees in electrical engineering from the university.

"We had a lot of the same teachers at RIT, which was really fun," says Weisberg. "One of my favorite professors, Dan Tessoni—an accounting professor—the first thing he always says to me is, 'How's mom?' because my mom had him for accounting, too."

At home her husband, John Weisberg, and her two French bulldogs—one named The Stig from "Top Gear" and the other Leeloo from "The Fifth Element"—keep her occupied. Weisberg met John, a fellow racecar driver, at the track and the two married in 2008.

Weisberg's biggest accomplishment outside of REDCOM is becoming a Sports Car Club of America professional racecar driver in 2004.

"I was always a maniac driver and I guess I needed an outlet for my rambunctiousness on the road," says Weisberg.

Not only does she compete on the track, but she is also a part-time high-performance driving instructor. Weisberg says it has been a rewarding job because it not only teaches people a fun skill, but it is also practical in everyday life and has saved her life on more than one occasion.

Whether it's heading a successful telecom company and working closely with some of the most secretive agencies or racing cars at Watkins Glen, Weisberg is always on the go.

Perpetually chasing her dreams, she lives by the quote she keeps hung on the wall in her office: "The only thing standing between you and your goal is the story you keep telling yourself as to why you can't achieve it."

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