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AWARDS

Certes CEO learned to rely on employees from former Graco boss

by Carla Solberg

WHEN SALLY MAINQUIST left the accounting department to land a job as the only female factory manager for Minneapolis-based Graco Inc. 20 years ago, one of her colleagues told her that the other managers didn't think she'd last six months. They were wrong.

The transition from accounting to operations was difficult, says Mainquist: "I had all male peers, all male direct reports and a male boss." But through it all, she also had the support of a mentor who had done the same thing, Graco chief financial officer, and later CEO, George Aristides.

"I knew he supported me and wouldn't have encouraged me to take the job if he didn't think I could do it," she says.

So she dove in, taking to heart Aristides' philosophy, that it's the employees doing the job who have all the answers. "I got out there and walked the floor," she says. "I met with each person, asked for suggestions and implemented many of their ideas, not to make friends, but because they were really good decisions."

When Graco got its ISO 9000 certification, the audit group pronounced Mainquist's factory "the jewel in the crown" and the manager who once predicted her failure had nothing but praise.

"I admire her," says Aristides, now retired. "She managed to survive among all those manufacturing people."

Mainquist left Graco after 13 years but she's never stopped applying Aristides' advice. "It's not like because you have a cer-



» Sally Mainquist

tain title, you have the best idea," she says. "You can't know where the next great idea is going to come from. It could come from the person at the reception desk."

During the four years she was vice president of manufacturing for Recovery Engineering, the Minneapolis manufacturer of water filtration systems including PUR, sales grew from \$10 million to \$90 million. "It was a great experience but it was a ton of work," she says.

She left to take a job at Certes Financial Pros, a St. Louis Park-based senior-level financial staffing firm with 200 consultants where she is now president and CEO. The firm was recently acquired by Staffing Now, a Des Moines-based company that wants to expand the Certes model nationally.

"They'd like to use us as a platform to open other offices in other cities," she says. "We do have a unique culture. Our firm is really known for supporting work/life balance."

The Certes philosophy is that treating others as you would like to be treated works in business, too. It echoes Aristides' belief that employees at all levels have something to contribute.

If you want to improve the process, you have to learn about it, says Aristides. "How can someone sitting on the top floor of a building tell someone to manufacture something better?" he says. "If you can't understand something, how can you make it better? Therefore it is very important to rely on the people."

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