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AWARD WINNERS

LOVE WHAT YOU DO

Jim Risk's passion for people and learning propelled a lifelong career and the growth of a business.

by Carol Katarsky

JIM RISK, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF KIRBY RISK CORP. IN Lafayette, Ind., is not just the second-generation owner of the company—he is also the second generation of the family to be awarded NAED's Arthur W. Hooper Achievement Award. In 1992, his father, Kirby Risk, was posthumously presented with the first-ever award. Risk accepted it on his father's behalf.

Risk has other near-familial ties to the industry. Arthur Hooper himself, for whom the award was named, was a family friend and lifelong mentor to Risk. Risk recalled that he first met Hooper in 1963, introduced by his father at an NAED conference, and over the years the two attended well over 100 NAED meetings together, lending increased personal significance to the award.

"I had no expectation of winning this award and I am truly humbled," said Risk. "It is especially meaningful to me because of my long-term connection with Art Hooper, who had a close personal relationship with the Risk family. Also, I am both honored and humbled to have my name included with the prior award winners. I know or have known each of the previous recipients—almost all very well. I was blessed to be immersed in our industry at a very young age, which allowed me the unique opportunity to develop relationships with these distinguished industry leaders and learn from their wisdom."





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When Risk says he knew the prior recipients, he is not talking about acquaintances. While discussing the award, he spontaneously recalled their personal details and anecdotes of times spent with many of the past recipients. Risk attributes much of his own success to having been able to network with so many business leaders at a relatively young age. His early-career desire for connection and relationship building, as well as seeking new learning opportunities, would be some of the hallmarks of his long career.

“What sets him apart is his lifelong cultivation of genuine, caring relationships with others,” said Jason Bricker, CFO and executive vice president of Kirby Risk Corp. “He has a unique ability to connect and stay connected.”

John Eggleton, president of Kirby Risk Electrical Supply and executive vice president and COO of Kirby Risk Corp., agreed: “Jim is very deserving of this prestigious and iconic award. As long as I’ve known him, he has been passionate about the betterment and advancement of our industry. Jim always sees the bigger picture—his decades of work with NAED, AD, NAW, and supplier councils has been focused on the overall growth of the electrical industry.”

An Early Start

As a young boy, Risk would frequently tag along to explore the warehouse and offices when his father returned to the office on weeknights and weekends. “I was fascinated with all of the different products, parts, and equipment,” Risk said. “But in most cases I did not understand their purpose or how they worked. I was intrigued and asked many questions.”

During his school years, Risk spent most summers working in the warehouse, and in time, his interest in the industry grew. Following college, he returned to work at the company full time.

“I began my career at the sales

counter; after a few years I was promoted to outside sales. This new opportunity took me out of my comfort zone, but I relished the opportunity to learn and develop my people skills,” Risk recalled.

After a brief flirtation with pursuing a career in sales outside the industry, Risk opted to stay with the family business. He eventually became vice president of sales, and then in 1972 at the age of 30, he was named president.

Before becoming company president, part of Risk’s training came through community involvement. He was president of the local chamber of commerce at the age of 29 and president of the local United Way at the age of 30. He also served as United Way campaign chairman and was a founder of the Greater Lafayette Community Foundation by age 35.

Having had such success relatively early might lead some people to throttle back a bit, but Risk dove in head-first, seeking new information, new connections, and, ultimately, new ways to grow the business he was now heading.

His involvement in organizations directly and indirectly related to electrical distribution is broad, deep, and active, including numerous leadership stints on distributor advisory councils and company boards, as YPO chapter chairman, as well as a host of Purdue campaigns and boards. Risk has served as chair of both the NAW and the Indiana State Chamber of Commerce. Within NAED, Risk has been an active and regular attendee at meetings and conferences for five

decades. He was a founding member of YET (precursor to the LEAD conference) and held leadership positions over the years that include serving on the board of directors, on the marketing committee, as chair of the industrial committee, and as area chair.

Risk sees involvement in community and the industry as a means of service, a learning opportunity, and a way to forge connections. “It is rewarding to be involved within our industry and with community service, and I have learned there is great satisfaction in serving others,” Risk said. “In reflecting on life’s fondest memories, they often are a result of the times you brightened the lives of others.

“I immersed myself in the industry,” he continued. “Not only for the education, but also to nurture relationships with vendor executives and fellow distributors. There is great value in idea exchange with leading distributors. By associating with CEOs and successful business leaders, I received many ideas and it stretched my vision of what I could accomplish.”

Those benefits extend beyond Risk himself or his company, according to Doug Mansfield, Kirby Risk Corp.’s president of manufacturing.

“What he has contributed to the industry through his knowledge and relationships has moved not only our company, but also the industry as a whole,” said Mansfield. “He gives back to the organization and others and keeps pushing everyone to keep up with the times. He is an exemplar of the type of person we want in the distribution business.”

WORDS OF PRAISE

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—John Eggleton,
Kirby Risk Corp.

Growth and Challenges

Risk's perspective and ability to forge connections throughout the industry served him well as he took on the task of expanding the company.

"When I became president, we had one location with about \$3 million in sales," Risk recalled. "We had a bold vision for growth and charted an aggressive growth path. At the time, reaching \$25 million in sales seemed like a challenging target. We first expanded to Columbus, Ind., in 1972, followed by new locations in Crawfordsville and Danville, Ill. By 1982, our sales had reached \$15 million, and then \$100 million in 1992. Our team achieved the \$200 million mark in 1995 and exceeded \$400 million in 2008."

While acquisitions played a role in that growth, the Kirby Risk team

found other ways to expand, first establishing the Kirby Risk Service Center, followed by ARCO Electric Products, Kirby Risk Precision Machining, and Kirby Risk Mechanical Solutions and Service.

Today, the company has more than 40 locations and hundreds of employees working in five separate but related businesses. Despite that growth, the company retains a culture that values employee empowerment, extremely high customer service, and a family-company feel—values that are rooted in the philosophy of Risk himself, as originally instilled by his father.

"Nurturing a culture including company values is key," said Risk. "Companies that endure are those with an effective corporate culture. Kirby Risk's culture revolves around

integrity, valuing others, and treating all people with respect—members of our team, customers, and vendors alike. From the beginning, our company has embraced those values regardless of changing business models and technology. The basics of being an effective leader have not changed: Your people watch what you do and what you do not do. You are responsible for setting a good example."

"There are a number of hallmarks that set Jim apart," said Bricker. "He is dedicated to serving others: customers, vendors, the industry, communities, and the employees of Kirby Risk. He is creative, insightful, tireless, and yet balanced. He empowers people and his 'can do' spirit permeates the organization. He genuinely loves people, and he leads with humility and grace. At Kirby Risk, our deep



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commitment to customer service is rooted in the concept of sacrificial service, which began with Jim's father. It's the willingness to go the extra mile to make sure the customer's needs are met."

"What I have found most remarkable is that the culture [Risk] built in his organization is a mirror of the values he holds as an individual: trust, family, relationships, and doing what you say you're going to do," said John McDermott, senior vice president of global sales and marketing, Rockwell Automation.

"He's a people-centric leader that values service to others," said Eggleton. "His priorities are focused on helping our customers, employees, and the communities we serve—not just his business. Jim's leadership style has produced strong results and also created a Kirby Risk culture that puts people first—and values the trusted relationships we enjoy with our business partners."

Eggleton noted that he knew Risk for 15 years before joining the company, when Kirby Risk was one of his former company's key distributor partners. "I've seen him work from outside and inside the company, and he has always genuinely enjoyed connecting with people. He goes out of his way to engage with employees, suppliers, and new acquaintances," he continued. "Jim treats everyone with respect and dignity regardless of their position or status."

Any company that experiences such expansion and longevity will experience challenges, and Kirby Risk is no exception. Those challenges were nimbly dealt with thanks in large part to its strong culture and Risk's own strengths.

"Our culture has allowed us to initiate change, reinventing our organization and processes periodically because we treated our people with respect. If they were displaced or had to be reassigned, we retrained them to meet new challenges," said Risk.

"When re-architecting a company, there will be disruptions. That was a big challenge early on. A leader's responsibility is not to preserve the practices of the past—his or her job is to initiate change. When moving people out of their comfort zone, do it in a manner that retains their dignity."

"I've seen him continually adapt to current business practices," said Mansfield. "He has made sure the company stays on top of technology changes so we always have state-of-the-art equipment and software packages. But maybe his best trait is building relationships with employees, customers, and vendors. He has built relationships with people all over the country, and he's been able to move the company forward that way."

A Look Ahead

Having been in the industry for so long, Risk understandably has strong opinions on the challenges distributors face today—and what they need to do to overcome them.

"Throughout the years, I have been blessed to be surrounded by a team of capable and committed professionals who have made me look good. Our company's greatest asset is not found on our balance sheet; it is our people. We are committed to providing opportunities for growth and creating a work atmosphere filled with acknowledgment and respect," Risk said. "If you have happy employees, you will have happy customers. Recruiting competent, high-energy people continues to be an industry challenge, especially for IT, e-commerce, and logistics."

Risk is excited about the future. "The explosive growth of e-commerce and IT is enabling businesses to bring products and services to the market faster than ever before," he said. "Distributors' continued success hinges on being able to stay close to customers, understanding their needs, and having a willingness to adapt to their changing requirements."

Risk's success and long tenure should not be read as nearing a close. Although he joked that receiving the Hooper award might be a signal to step aside, he remains active and has an ambitious list of goals, both personal and professional.

"Within the industry, I continue as chairman of NAW's WD-PAC and remain involved with NAED. I am also active on a number of boards including the Indiana State Chamber, Central Indiana Corporate Partners, and Western & Southern Financial," Risk said. "It is stimulating to stay involved and increase my knowledge. Life's happiness and fulfillment are found in the journey, not the destination. Remember: Success must be earned over and over again."

Closer to home, his key focus now, aside from spending time with his family, is creating the next generation of leadership within the company and continuing to learn—including from young and old alike.

"Age was never a barrier to me. I have friends in their 20s and 30s now, and when I was 30, I was traveling with business leaders in their 60s. We can learn from everyone. And it is especially important to network with leaders you admire," he said.

"I have countless wonderful and fun memories of my more than 50 years of involvement with NAED. I value the trusting friendships my wife and I have nurtured with so many great people throughout the years. My association with NAED has helped me grow as a person and leader," Risk said. "I have had a love affair with NAED and our great industry: Distributors respect the manufacturers, manufacturers respect the distributors, and competitors respect one another. Our industry is a wonderful environment to spend a career." ■

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