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Dean's Executive Leadership Series - 2008-2009

Transcript of Interview with Sheri Miksa, former CEO, President and Director of Robeks Corporation

About DELS: The Dean's Executive Leadership Series at the [Graziadio School of Business and Management](#) features in-depth audio or video interviews with today's top business practitioners and thought leaders. [Listen](#) or [subscribe](#) to the podcast to hear their views and insight on the current challenges and opportunities facing the business community.

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Man 1: The Graziadio School of Business and Management at Pepperdine University proudly presents The Dean's Executive Leadership Series. This podcast invites top business practitioners and thought leaders to share their view on the real world of business.

Rick Gibson: Hello and welcome, my name is Rick Gibson, I'm the Associate Vice President for Public Affairs here at Pepperdine University. I'm joined today by Dr. Linda Livingstone who is the Dean of the Graziadio School of Business and Management. Welcome, Linda.

Dean Linda Livingstone: Thanks Rick, it's good to be with you today.

Rick Gibson: Tell us who is on tap for today.

Dean Linda Livingstone: Today we're going to listen to Sheri Miksa. She's the former CEO, President and Director of Robeks Corporation. Prior to that she served as CEO, President and Director of Rubio's Restaurant so has tremendous experience in the food service and hospitality industries.

Rick Gibson: Sounds like it should be a terrific interview, so let me invite our listeners to sit back and relax and to enjoy this conversation with Sheri Miksa, former CEO, President and Director of Robeks Corporation.

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Dean Linda Livingstone: Well, welcome to our podcast today. We are fortunate to have with us Sheri Miksa who has spent about 25 years in the food service and hospitality industry, most recently as CEO and President of Robeks Juice Corporation, but she was also prior to that CEO of Rubio's Restaurant, so has a long history in a variety of ways. So welcome, Sheri, it's a pleasure to have you with us today.

Sheri Miksa: Thank you, it's my pleasure.

Dean Linda Livingstone: So let's begin Sheri by sharing with our listeners a little bit about your background and how you got to where you are today. Because you started out in a very interesting way on the slopes of Alaska with the pipeline, so you might tell us a little bit about that sort of interesting start to your career and how you then got into becoming a CEO in the food service industry.

Sheri Miksa: Absolutely. Well, it is true that my first management job was running a hotel on the top of The Alaska Pipeline, not too traditional but definitely very interesting. And I learned then that I loved operations. And I really loved customer-focused organizations. And there my customers were oilfield workers in a remote location, so it was a pretty exciting opportunity. And I've always said if I could do that, I could do anything. So it was there that I discovered that I really enjoyed the food service and hospitality side of the business. And I liked having the P&L accountability, I liked running the operations and being fully accountable. So as I've had opportunities throughout my career, they've really been building on top of each other and progressing on up through multiple opportunities in operations.

I also had the opportunity coming out of my MBA program to go into consumer products so I have great management experience with PepsiCo and Frito Lay specifically, and then I also came back from there and ran restaurants for Taco Bell. That was my first corporate restaurant side of the business. And I really loved it and found that that business just got in my blood. And through the years I've progressed up through various other roles, Vice President of Operations for LSG Sky Chefs, running international flight kitchens for their airlines all over the country. And also I ran a region for them, and also then driving in the restaurant side with Seattle Coffee Company, driving their business, which was Seattle's Best Coffee and Torrefazione Italia where I was Chief Operating Officer and then twice then CEO as you indicated, once for Rubio's Restaurants, which is a publicly traded company, and most recently for Robek's Juice, a franchise corporation that is focused on providing premium fruit smoothies and healthy eats for people looking for healthier options.

Dean Linda Livingstone: So it's interesting as I think about your career, and we just had Julia Stewart come to our last DELS and we interviewed her, and she talks very particularly about how she knew she

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wanted to be a CEO. And she made some very distinct career choices to prepare her to do that, and she didn't start in operations, she moved to operations. You actually started in operations. So were you that deliberate about becoming a CEO? At what point did you know that you wanted to do that and how did you prepare yourself for it versus it just sort of happened because you were sort of in the right place at the right time?

Sheri Miksa: Well, it's interesting, when I made the decision to go get my MBA, it was with the assumption that I wanted to be a corporate executive and I wanted to be in a leadership role. I had enjoyed running the hotel on the top of The Alaska Pipeline, although I didn't see myself doing that for the rest of my life. And so it really was that assumption that my MBA would be the transition point to move me then into a corporate leadership role. Now as I indicated, originally I went into brand management and I really did believe that that was the direction I would want to go for a very long time. And ultimately I realized that I missed the operating side of the business, and that's what brought me back then to the restaurant side when I had the opportunity to go to work for Taco Bell. So I think that it was a combination of things and they each built one on top of the other. And as I got progressively more responsible roles, I realized that ultimately I did want to lead the organization and have the vision and the strategy and be able to bring people along to greatness as I call it. And that really was something that I discovered along the way as I got increasing responsibility in my roles.

Dean Linda Livingstone: So as we talk to our alumni and our MBA students who might have interest in moving up to those senior levels at some point, whether it's CEO or another C-level position, I mean what have you learned from your experience that you would tell them that's really important to prepare yourself for that kind of a responsibility if you really think you want to do it at some point.

Sheri Miksa: Mmm. You know, it's interesting, I think the more diverse opportunities that you can have as a leader as you move up in your career, the better. I definitely think that having line management experience is critical, being able to comfortably run a P&L and really know that the buck stops with you, is important. And for a lot of people, that line management experience isn't something that they might immediately go towards, but I think it's probably the best thing that I had. And the other part of it is to really give yourself diverse experiences. And so for some people there may be a really straight line from the time that they finish their four year degree 'til they ultimately reach their highest level of an organization or in an industry. In my case, I was in a number of different areas in marketing, in operations, in strategic roles. And all of those really helped to give me a much broader experience base, all of which is absolutely critical as you ultimately get to the role of CEO.

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Dean Linda Livingstone: So in companies that you've been CEO, one was private and one was public, talk a little bit about the differences and similarities in those experiences from a CEO perspective and what are things you liked or didn't like about each and, you know, how different does that makes being a CEO? Even though you were in food service and restaurants, what was unique about them given the public versus the private nature of each?

Sheri Miksa: Well, it's interesting. The public side obviously, you spend a lot of time discussing and reporting and you certainly have a lot more of your time and focus on the street and doing analyst calls and doing your quarterly results and press release. On the privately held side, you can focus more on building the business and growing the business, and in fact, when I was running Robeks, it was with a focus on really helping that organization to become a growth engine. And really putting it into a faster mode to be able to grow. And I really spent all of my time out in the field, with the franchisees, as well as building an organization to support a rapid growth mode. When I was running Rubio's as a public company, I also had the opportunity to need to roll out the Sarbanes-Oxley requirements as those came along while I was leading the organization. So that added a whole 'nother side of complexity to things.

Dean Linda Livingstone: It's probably not something you planned on when you went into that role.

Sheri Miksa: I did not, but I will tell you that one of the things that you continue to learn, especially as you get into a CEO role, is how very critical it is to surround yourself with great people. And I had the benefit of having brought on an excellent CFO and together we were able to roll out the Sarbanes-Oxley requirements to the company, which of course added more complexity to our day-to-day roles and we had plenty on our plate as it was before that came along. But having that team and building a team is probably one of the things that most critical for a CEO. And particularly when I was running Rubio's, I had the benefit of bringing in a lot of really great people to augment the people that were already there and really drive a transformation of the company under my leadership.

Dean Linda Livingstone: I'm glad you brought up the issue of building your leadership team, 'cause I think that's just so critical, and I'm not sure people always realize how important it is to put the right people around you. So you need different kinds of people around you in public versus a private company? What did you find in that regard versus you're just really trying to find people that compliment your skills? Did that play out much differently in those two organizations in terms of how you identified the right people to put on your team?

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Sheri Miksa: That's an interesting question. From the standpoint certainly of the CFO, that's the one role that really is quite different because of all the public company reporting and the legal compliance side. But beyond that, I think so much of it really is about just finding bright, smart people who are committed and as passionate as you are about the brand and the company and about really driving excellence day-to-day in the operations, which ultimately drives a profitable company. And I think that you can never underestimate the importance of having those right people on the bus and in the right seats. I think, you know, we all read about it, we all hear about it, but it is awfully difficult to do everything that you're asked to do as a CEO if you don't have yourself surrounded by fabulous lieutenants who, when you're not there or even when you are, are also representing the company at such a high level that everybody speaks with one voice.

Dean Linda Livingstone: You've over the years developed a bit of a reputation for sort of transforming companies or turning companies around. What is it about your style that you think has done that or what does it take differently to be that kind of a CEO versus a CEO that is taking a company that's already, you know, quite successful and just sort of moving them on a trajectory that they're already on? So what have you learned through your experiences that are significant about being sort of a turnaround CEO versus a different type of CEO?

Sheri Miksa: I think that certainly one of the things that I've always been is curious. I always want to see what's on the other side of the bend. And so from the standpoint of a company, there's always been that question about "What if we did this differently or what could we become versus our competition if we thought about the business differently?" And as I've had that feeling for so long, it's always been a matter of being able to then apply it to a business. And I think that particularly my passion for guest service in my world has always put me in good stead. Because I think looking at the world through the customer's eyes is always one of the most important things. And as I've looked at whether I'm doing a personal transformation or whether I'm doing a corporate turnaround, the important thing is really to look at your business from the standpoint of "What can you do that's different? What can you do that exceeds your customer's expectations?" And I think always having that idea that there's more ahead and more possible allows you, with the right people, to really push to that next level and be able to, as I love to say, take it out of the box and look at it from all sides before you put it back in a bold new way. And that's a lot of what you have to have as your approach when you're doing transformations and turnarounds.

Dean Linda Livingstone: So in the economy that we're dealing with right now, which is unbelievably challenging for all different kinds of companies, do you think it's that sort of turnaround mentality that's going to make the difference for companies or, I mean, what do you see in terms of the need for

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leadership right now to help companies sort of get through this difficult time and get to the other side of it successfully, no matter whether you're large or small or whatever?

Sheri Miksa: I do think that mindset of transformations and turnarounds is key. And whether you're turning around your department or your division or you're looking at a way to transform the business, sadly what we've seen is that business as usual isn't good enough right now. And even before we went into these turbulent economic times, we had already gotten to a place, particularly in retail organizations, where people had so many choices. Whether it was a restaurant, whether it was a hotel, whether it was a shopping experience. If you weren't able to meet or exceed their expectations, they had lots of other choices. And so I think now perhaps more than ever before, we really are at a time where people need to have that mindset of "What do I need to do substantially differently to change the game so that not only in the long-term but in the short-term, my business will be successful?"

Dean Linda Livingstone: So while you were CEO at Rubio's and Robeks, you were also on the board. But now that you're sort of out of those CEO roles, you also continue to serve on some boards and in some board roles. What did you learn as a CEO that you think has sort of helped you as a board member, a non-CEO board member, that would be valuable for other people to know that are on boards or thinking about being on boards?

Sheri Miksa: Well, certainly the role of the CEO and board member is different in terms of the CEO being tasked with leading the organization and looking out for the shareholders. And from a risk mitigation standpoint, it really is up to the CEO to identify and mitigate risks. Having been a CEO and now being a board member and also having been a board member as CEO, it's interesting to identify successful board members as being those who often raise those tough risk-related questions and really look at the world from the standpoint of what-if. And I think that a successful board member, one that has been formally a CEO or has also watched closely their CEO on their own boards, we'll really notice that they have that opportunity to appropriately push on the risk side of the business, especially this economy. It's so important that board members take a really active role in asking those questions. Not that they will manage the company and not that they will be personally responsible for mitigating that risk, that's the CEO's role as they drive the shareholder value of the company. But having that approach to the business I think is one that I definitely have gotten from being a CEO and board member.

Dean Linda Livingstone: As I look at your resume, you have served on The Women's Food Service Forum, we're actually both part of The Women's Corporate Director Group together, so you've been involved in a variety of ways through your career in groups really trying to promote women into leadership

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roles. And how have you seen sort of that challenge or those opportunities change from being in Alaska in a very male-dominated setting, all the way up to being CEO and on boards of companies and what do you see as sort of the challenges and opportunities for women now moving into those kinds of positions?

Sheri Miksa: Well, I think the good news is that there are more women in those senior roles now than there were certainly when I started out in my career. And so if anything, the thing that we didn't have as many of was role models. And so today's women who are interested in going into leadership roles I think have more role models to see. Organizations like The Women Corporate Directors and Women's Food Service Forum are excellent though in terms of development organizations and offering opportunities for networking, which is one of the most important things as people look to build their careers, is really building a network of successful executives and having those individuals that they can tap. Certainly one of the things that I believe in and that The Women's Food Service Forum is very focused on is mentoring. And I often, as I do now, have more than one person that I'm mentoring. And I think it's so important to give back. And having had the opportunity to move up successfully through my career and achieve the role of CEO, for many people there's things that they can learn from that track, and I'm happy to give back through organizations like these that I belong to.

Dean Linda Livingstone: What do you think it takes to be a good mentor, if someone is in a similar position as you and has the opportunity to give back, I mean what have you found or what did you find as a mentee and people mentoring you, and as you mentor others, what are some things that you think are really important in being a successful and helpful mentor?

Sheri Miksa: I think it's important to push a mentee to not use the relationship as just "Tell me all the answers." And I think some people come into a mentor relationship with that belief that somebody that came before them and has achieved senior roles would be able to just tell them what to do. When in fact to be a good mentee, what's most helpful is to push yourself and to, as I like to say, to try some things on in a non-threatening arena where you can say "Here's what I'm thinking, here's an approach I'd like to take." But don't just come with the idea of "Here's this problem I have, please fix it for me." And the people that I have enjoyed most mentoring are those ones that have really stretched themselves and pushed themselves with some new ideas and some things that perhaps they wouldn't have thought of before. And often I'll help them with that if they say "Well, what do you think about such and such?" I'll say "Well, why don't you share with me what you're thinking. What direction do you believe you should go in? And share with me your thoughts and then let's have some discussion about that." And I find that that also continues to give mentees confidence that they really do often have the answers and they really do often know what they ought to do, but it's a lot easier if somebody will just tell them. And a good mentor,

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mentee relationship isn't just telling, but it's guiding, it's pushing, it's questioning and certainly role-modeling the right behaviors.

Dean Linda Livingstone: I'm sure you've learned some things from those mentor relationships as well, just from the mentees that you've worked with over the years.

Sheri Miksa: Absolutely, yeah.

Dean Linda Livingstone: In the business school at Pepperdine, we talk about a mission that focuses on developing value-centered leaders and advancing responsible business practice. So as you reflect on kind of your philosophy as a leader, what are the values that you sort of hold dear to that guide you kind of through the difficult times and the good times, that keep you on track for where you should go and how you should sort of frame decisions that you've made?

Sheri Miksa: Probably the first one is people first, and all my life I've believed that helping others get ahead, develop themselves, is one of the most important things in life. And whether that's in your personal life or whether that's in your business life, certainly as you become a CEO you have an opportunity to help a lot of people be very successful. And so I think that idea of people first is certainly important to me personally and something that I've always been guided by. The obvious ones that your mother always taught you about being honest and having integrity, those are clearly important ones. And I believe in following your passion, and certainly there's a lot of things that I have done in my life that have just absolutely fit the things that I'm passionate about. And most of them on the business side, guest service-focused organizations and, you know, really helping people to— for an opportunity for guests to come to a place that they have a great experience. So I think having that passion to drive you in what you do and following that on a personal and professional basis, is really important. And especially now where again, people have so many choices I think in terms of where they spent their time and where they spend their money. Being affiliated with things that make you feel good and where you can help others feel good about themselves is really important. And I would say, even in this difficult economic time when it can be hard to find a place that you feel good about or that there's so much negativity going on, that helping people to find that place and to feel good about themselves or what they're doing is certainly—it may be even more critical now than it can be at other times.

Dean Linda Livingstone: So Sheri, now that you have done CEO a couple of times and have served on some boards, what are you thinking about you want to do in the next few years of your career?

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Sheri Miksa: Well, I definitely want to take the opportunity to bring together all of the experiences that I've had and lead an organization with scale. Whether it be as the CEO or as the President, there's a lot of guest-focused organizations out there that I think could benefit from somebody with my transformational approach. And it would be really exciting to be able to bring it all together and lead an organization with scale, while still also offering my time for board service as I have and staying involved with some of the organizations like The Women's Food Service Forum and The Women Corporate Directors, as I have so far.

Dean Linda Livingstone: Tell us a little bit more about The Women's Food Service Forum and what that organization's focus is and kind of your role in that.

Sheri Miksa: Well, I have had the benefit of being a member for almost 15 years now. And it is a development organization, really it's the go-to development organization for the Food Service and Hospitality industry. And we've grown to over 3500 members, men and women, who are focused on and believe in the value of elevating women leaders. And we really focus on the business case for diversity. We know that companies that have more women and more diverse boards and more diverse c-suites have also delivered better results. And so that business case is what ultimately guides us as we help women in all stages of their career who want to develop themselves into leadership roles at either the emerging leader level as we call it, all the way up to the c-suite and CEOs and also taking on board roles. So it's a very dynamic organization full of wonderful people from the Food Service and Hospitality industry, the executives that have given their time. And in fact, it was the place that I got my first opportunity to be on a Board of Directors. And I served on the Board of Directors of The Women's Food Service Forum for four years, and as a not-for-profit organization, it's really focused on helping people develop themselves and giving them the tools to get to that next level and to really take their careers to where they want them to go.

Dean Linda Livingstone: In the time you had been involved with that organization, what would you say you're most proud of that you've seen accomplished through that organization?

Sheri Miksa: You know, we really have stepped up our focus on executive women and getting more women into C-suites and onto boards. And again, it's based on business case, which really says that fundamentally those companies that had a more diverse C-suite and board do better financially. But I've been very proud to see that we've put a lot of programming in place, we do an annual conference, we do an invitation-only executive summit that's done annually, and then we do regional meetings periodically so that people have a chance to interact with leadership of the organization. And I think for a lot of people,

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it's given them an opportunity to—outside of their companies, stretch themselves—push themselves. We're an all-volunteer organization, so people can take on committee roles as I have. I actually chaired the mentor committee for a couple of years and you can get chair roles. And so there's a lot of opportunities for people to really do things for themselves in their own development that perhaps they may not have the opportunity to do in their company. And it builds their confidence, it builds their leadership capability and puts more tools in the toolbox that they can apply as they move themselves forward in their career.

Dean Linda Livingstone: Many of those organizations that you talk about have sort of a social good piece to them, now in addition, some of them are for profit, some of them are non-profit. And certainly Robeks was very interested in the healthy approach. You know, with the economy doing what it's doing, I know I've read some things and been involved in some discussions where people questioned whether or not this whole social sustainability and environmental sustainability, kind of the different look at business, will actually be able to manage through this and that if oftentimes could get lost in a difficult economic times. Because there's a perception that it doesn't always add to the bottom line, I think there's debate about that, and rightfully so. But how do you see that, do you think that will gain traction during times like this, do you think it will take a backseat to other issues that may seem more oppressing? Because you've been involved in a variety of issues that have sort of a social emphasis, particularly around the health food aspect and health and wellness kinds of issues, what's your take on that right now?

Sheri Miksa: You know, it's interesting. I think that, again, people have so many choices. And I also know that currently people are eating out less, they're spending less, I mean we all see it everyday in the economy. So when they do go out or when they do go to the grocery store or when they do do something for entertainment or recreation, I think if anything they're more focused on what's important to them. And so I believe that giving people options is going to be more important. Now the challenge of course is that some of these approaches are actually more expensive, you know, restaurants that are focused on 100 percent organic for example. They may feel like they're doing all the right things and being focused in the right area, but the question then comes down to "Will the consumer pay for that higher level?" And the good news, is at least so far, people have generally said "I want to make those choices myself and I want to have those options." But I think time will tell, it'll certainly be really important for those businesses to manage the economic side of it so that they can stay financially viable during perhaps a slower time where everything is slower. But I think in the end, I do think people are making smarter choices and they're saying "I want to do the things that are important to me and to my family." Childhood obesity is becoming a much larger issue, so a lot of people that maybe in the past were focused just on convenience, may now say "I'm focused more on health and wellness and starting those good habits younger." So people I think will continue to seek out those places where they have more options. And that's really I think what it's about is providing choices and providing options for people, not about having

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a health food restaurant or a health food store necessarily, but giving people that want those choices a way to do that. And I laughingly say that I think menus are merely suggestions, so as I go into a restaurant, I always look to see what they offer and I figure that I can create whatever it is that I want to have.

Dean Linda Livingstone: Right, mix and match to get what you want.

Sheri Miksa: Exactly, exactly. So I think as long as you have those choices, then people can make their own decisions.

Dean Linda Livingstone: So I want you to share with our listeners some of your advice, and completely unrelated to what we've been talking about, but you have a background in musical theatre and did training in that. I don't know how much of that you continue to do personally, but I know you enjoy going to plays and everything. So what advice would you give our listeners for what plays they really should see that are musicals or other kinds of things.

Sheri Miksa: The must-sees?

Dean Linda Livingstone: Yes, the things they have to see because that's something you love and enjoy doing.

Sheri Miksa: You know, that's interesting, I would say of the shows that are out now, *Wicked*, which is the prequel to *The Wizard of Oz*. And of course you and I talked about *The Wizard of Oz* earlier and how much I loved that movie and thought it was ahead of its time. And certainly *The Phantom of the Opera* and a number of—not surprisingly I would choose the musicals. But those are two of my absolute favorites. And then I like to go back to the traditional ones. I like *The Sound of Music* and I like the early ones like *Oklahoma* and in a simpler time, in a place where people actually could sing and dance across the stages of America, that was just great.

Dean Linda Livingstone: I have to say, I really commend your choices. *Wicked* is one of my daughter's most favorite of all, she loves musicals. And I am from Oklahoma, so it's dear to my heart that you like the play *Oklahoma*, and we've seen it many times and know all the songs although you wouldn't want us to sing them for you.

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Sheri Miksa: I understand, well, we could sing them together.

Dean Linda Livingstone: Well, it would be better if you were doing it alone I'm sure. Well, Sheri, it's just been a pleasure visiting with you, and thank you so much for sharing your time with us today. I wish you the best with the endeavors ahead of you.

Sheri Miksa: Thank you very much, it was my pleasure to do so.

Rick Gibson: Well, Linda, that was certainly an enjoyable conversation.

Dean Linda Livingstone: It was great talking to Sheri and really learning about an industry we probably don't spend as much talking about in MBA programs as you would expect in terms of Food Service and Hospitality.

Rick Gibson: Well, tell us who we can look forward to hearing from next.

Dean Linda Livingstone: On April 7th, we have Priscilla Stewart Jones. She's the Senior Vice President of Human Resources of McKesson Corporation. And she will be joining us in Northern California for that event on April 7th.

Rick Gibson: Sounds like it will be a terrific interview. Let me invite our listeners who are enjoying these podcasts if they would like to learn more about them to subscribe by going to bschool.pepperdine.edu/dels, that's D-E-L-S. and if you like to as well you can visit our channel on YouTube and iTunes. Until next time, thank you for listening.

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