

INTERVIEW WITH A LEADER: DAVE RENGACHARY



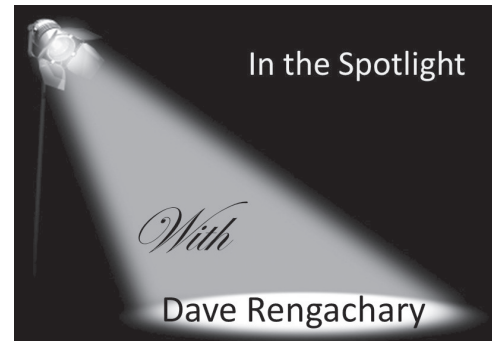
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Describe a leader who engaged and inspired you. How did you change as a result of that leadership?

Although our leadership styles are totally different, Dave Wheeler (who many in the *ON THE RISK* readership may be well familiar with) is a leader who inspired me. During his time at RGA, Dave had the ability to grow potential in people well outside of their current roles. He didn't view people in terms of pre-defined career tracks. In fact, it was due in part to his guidance that I first took the leap from clinical medicine to insurance medicine, and ultimately outside of insurance medicine, which led me to my current role in underwriting.

Insurance is still a fundamentally relationship-driven business. No one exemplified this better than Dave. We jokingly referred to his network as FODs – Friends of Dave. I strive to develop these relationships, whether among the RGA workforce or across the industry. When my own career is over, I know relationships are where I will have found the greatest value.

Dave also lived and breathed RGA. When I exited clinical medicine, I never expected to enter a corporate role in which I would be so personally invested in the lives and careers of those around me. Through Dave's example and through others at RGA, I have learned to encourage my colleagues to expand their career paths. The collective success of our teams follows naturally when individuals are encouraged to face challenges and take risks, backed by the support of their leaders and the confidence in a strategy they have had a hand in shaping.



About the Subject *This is an interview with Dave Rengachary. He currently serves as Senior Vice President and Head of Underwriting in US Mortality Markets for RGA Reinsurance Company.*

What leadership characteristic do you possess that makes you most effective? Can you describe a situation where this characteristic helped you and your team?

I believe authenticity and approachability are important characteristics of a strong leader. I use humor frequently to make myself relatable, diffuse tense situations, and well, because it's just who I am. I'm not afraid to ask questions, I don't need to be the expert in every subject, and I'm certainly not the smartest person in the room. I want everyone on my team, no matter the role, to feel comfortable in approaching me and expressing their opinion. I value dissenting feedback that offers a constructive and better path forward.

How do you coach employees to help them grow in their careers?

It sounds cliché, but I truly believe it begins with understanding the vision of where employees want to be in the future. I encourage them to really be honest with themselves in their current stage – and let them know there are no wrong answers. Their vision can and should be revised frequently, but even from that initial stage, the skill and experience gaps usually surface readily. I'm very fortunate to be at a company with extensive resources and a vast internal network to fill any gaps. Sometimes the missing element is new exposures and experiences. We've all encountered colleagues whose career trajectories took a welcome right turn due to an unexpected project or rotation. I myself have taken on unexpected roles that stretched me in ways that I would not have anticipated when I started out in medicine and allowed me to grow into the professional I am today.

Do you have any other impactful events in your career that helped shape your leadership style?

We often describe the pandemic as an accelerant in the context of several underwriting trends. It also happened to accelerate my career. The pandemic produced so many empty spaces in conversations and meetings: No one knew the “right” answer because there were so many unknowns early on at that time, I became exceedingly comfortable in sharing my thoughts – even if they were not fully formed, were outside my area of expertise, or were contrary to the current sentiment. I found that, if people disagreed, they still appreciated having something to react to and the space to be vulnerable and have conversations.

Can you describe a failure or setback that helped you learn?

After 13 years of education and training, I never thought I would leave clinical neurology! In retrospect, I only wish I had transitioned to insurance earlier. During those last years of practice, the fear of failure, or being deemed a failure, weighed heavy. The lesson learned is simple but clear: Never be afraid to challenge yourself with something completely outside of your comfort zone. Silence those inner voices of fear and judgment. At the end of the day, you have one career, and it belongs to you alone.

Is there something you struggle with in your leadership position?

I’m a natural introvert. At a party, most often I’d rather pet the dog than socialize. Sometimes I just don’t feel like being “on.” Often, I try to fight that feeling and just jump in. But at other times, I’ve learned to honor that part of myself and have gotten comfortable in my own skin. Identifying those characteristics in myself has allowed me to seek out other people who I see retreating in social settings, and it has created opportunity for authentic connection.

Do you have any words of wisdom for new leaders?

Don’t skimp on developing strategy. It’s hard, it takes time, and it can be messy, but you will be well rewarded. Socialize the strategy and invite pushback wherever possible. Then, communicate that strategy as often as you can so each stakeholder understands his or her role and believes that he or she can contribute. Constantly revisit the strategy throughout the year. It will be your North Star to arbitrate all the tough decisions that surface throughout the year. Ultimately, your strategy will be your differentiator.