

A sustaining focus

Charles Ruffing leads the New York State Pollution Prevention Institute based at RIT.

Applying his passion to sustainability

Charles Ruffing is director of the New York State Pollution Prevention Institute

By **KERRY FELTNER**

There is a rigor to questioning old notions. Often in business there has to be significant evidence or factors driving change.

That juxtaposition is where Charles Ruffing has spent much of his career: He assesses seemingly contradictory information and finds ways businesses or employees can create a new path forward.

That skill has helped him throughout his career, although it is most prevalent in his current role as director of the New York State Pollution Prevention Institute. P2I is sponsored by the state Department of Environmental Conservation. The aim of P2I is to make New York more sustainable.

P2I has helped 28 companies across the state receive commercialization assistance, which created 81 jobs and an economic impact of \$28.3 million for the state's economy. P2I also has created \$2.7 million in support for industry-relevant research and development and \$1.1 million in support for community

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projects and has assisted 22 companies in creating a sustainable supply chain.

Ruffing took the helm of the organization in January 2016. He oversees 15 people at its headquarters, its only location, at Rochester Institute of Technology. The Golisano Institute for Sustainability leads the P2I effort at RIT.

"The real passion (P2I) appealed to was the intersection of business and environment," Ruffing says. "It was something I had done and felt that I was good at and passionate at Kodak, and now I get to extend that through the whole New York State."

In addition to RIT, other partners of the institute are Clarkson University, SUNY Buffalo and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

"It's an exciting time," Ruffing says. "We're operating very effectively to our work plan. We've got more pipeline coming in than we have in the past, and we've got some new funding areas opening up to us to keep the momentum going."

In the next few years Ruffing hopes to build on what P2I has accomplished while staying ahead of what businesses need to be thinking about regarding sustainability.

"In the three- to five-year timeframe, I want to try and build strategies that get at those unique slices rather than a one-size fits all program," he adds.

Ruffing grew up in Coatesville, Pa., where a chemistry class set him on his career path.

"I always liked math a lot so I always was kind of inclined towards math, and as a teenager I didn't know what people could do with math," he says. "In a high school chemistry curriculum, math's very important so that really piqued my interest. From then I knew I was going to major in chemistry, and I still call myself a chemist."

He attended Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia. There his love of chemistry and math was nurtured but he also was exposed to the arts—a balance that served him well in life, he says.

"St. Joe's is a Jesuit institution, and they really emphasize broad liberal arts," he says. "I had a lot of chemistry, but you had to take theology, you had to take philosophy, you had to take history; I found that that kind of colored my world-view of knowledge and lifelong learning."

With his undergraduate degree completed, Ruffing left the East Coast and enrolled in the Ph.D. chemistry program at the University of Illinois.

"This is 1979, there's no cellphones, (it is) hop in the car and just drive cross country," Ruffing says. "It was a big adventure, but it was just so invigorating being around all these people that loved chemistry. We would go out to bars at night and people would flip over popcorn containers and start drawing structures."

The experience taught him something he never forgot. "One of the things that I think I carried forward in my life is that I could hold my own with the best around," Ruffing says. "I was definitely middle of the pack there, and I was a big fish in a small pond at St. Joe's, but I realized that some of the most brilliant chemists in the country I could interact with and be a peer with. That formed my view and how I've interacted in my business career."

After five years in the program, Ruffing graduated, hoping to land a job in academia. Instead he started working for Milwaukee-based, Sigma-Aldrich Co. LLC. The firm sold research quantities of inorganic chemistry to research labs nationwide.

Ruffing was responsible for a product line within the company from the start.

"What they wanted me to do is think of what researchers in inorganic chemistry need to have around their lab and go in the lab and make it and write advertisements for it and track the

sales of it, and that was really a fascinating experience," Ruffing says. "This was my first job and essentially I'm getting profit-and-loss-responsibility for this product line."

Five years later, Ruffing connected with a grad school friend who worked for Eastman Kodak Co. His friend mentioned a job that seemed ideal and the kind of change Ruffing was looking for. He also favored being closer to family in Philadelphia.

He started at Kodak in 1992 as the company started downsizing.

"I came to Kodak at a time when they just did one of their first large reductions in force," Ruffing says. "They got over-subscribed and they needed to hire a couple of people back. So I came there and film was just about at its peak. People could see some storm clouds on the horizon, but things were still operating."

He was at Kodak for 24 years. Susan Wylie was a colleague of Ruffing there.

"I developed great respect for Chuck," she says. "He earned the respect of his colleagues because of his outstanding leadership and management style, his intellect and his sense of humor. Colleagues were drawn to him because of his humility and listening skills, and because he clearly showed an extremely high degree of expertise and preparation in his work."

Ruffing was a major part of Kodak's changes, she says.

"I am not exaggerating when I say that Kodak's reorganization and emergence from bankruptcy were successful largely because of Chuck's efforts," Wylie says. "He successfully navigated extremely complex environmental issues, at the state and national levels, and Kodak may not have successfully emerged

from bankruptcy and remained as a strong company in Rochester if those issues had not been resolved. He is an example of the type of intellectual strength of Rochester residents."

Ruffing stayed mostly in the health safety and environmental division of the organization but moved from his past job of laboratory testing of chemicals to leading a team of 125 people.

Brad Kruchten is president of the print systems division and senior vice president at Kodak. He worked with Ruffing for some two decades.

"In my opinion his success is due to three factors: his passion, his knowledge and his concern for others," he says. "Passion for Chuck is something that is second nature, but not the overt

think about it from the environmental perspective," Ruffing says. "Certainly there's more awareness, there's more regulation on certain things. But even in the early '90s, the regulations around placing new chemicals in the market (required) you to do some environmental thinking."

At Kodak, Ruffing toyed with the notion that businesses could be sustainable and profitable. That was an incongruous notion back then.

"I became especially passionate about how businesses need to understand the value of their environmental performance," he says. "There was always a debate whether you could be profitable or you could be environmentally responsible. And I became passionate around trying to show and demonstrate to business leaders that they were not mutually exclusive in the same way that R&D is not."

"R&D does the same thing. It takes some profit from today and invests it so that in the future you can have more profit."

Without knowing it, Ruffing was setting the stage for his role at P2I. He began to show businesses how to reduce costs which, in turn, was better for the environment.

"I think that I helped move the needle a little bit in having the businesses not think of this as something outside of what they needed to manage but something that they needed to manage to help reduce their costs or get into new markets," he says.

Today consumers are holding businesses accountable. When the customer brings concerns, business leaders listen, Ruffing says. There's a lot more public awareness.

Time for change

After two decades at Kodak, a move in his personal life caused Ruffing to wonder what else he could change.

"My wife and I, on kind of short notice, bought a new house in Fairport, so we moved out of the place that we had raised the kids," Ruffing says. "And it kind of put in my mind that even at my age I could still make a change... And Kodak, after it emerged from bankruptcy, the job was smaller than what it had been. (It) still had lots of interesting challenges and so on, but I thought it might be time for me to try something different."

Landing at P2I has been a welcome change for Ruffing. In his first year, he covered all parts of the state to better understand the needs and challenges of each area. He did not want to assume anything.

"My goal was to learn the ropes a little bit. I didn't want to come in like a bull in a china shop," Ruffing says. "This organization was functioning very well when I got here. I wanted to listen and make sure I understood the lay of the land."

Elizabeth Meer, a special assistant for policy at the state Department of Environmental Conservation, is on the advisory board of P2I.

"He's incredibly good, and I think his real skillset is his character traits," she says. "He's really collaborative. He's a team builder, and he's a good listener. He has visited every single one of the DEC regional directors since he began. He's gone on this listening tour around the state."

"You need both vision and you need these really good management skills, and there's not a lot of people that combine those two" like Chuck does, she adds.

Today the challenge is telling businesses P2I is a resource for them.

"The challenge for us is increasing our awareness statewide,"



Photo by Kate Melton

Ruffing says. "A second challenge is just to stay ahead of where the problems are bubbling up for New York State businesses and communities. There's a need to be on the forefront of understanding what the issues are out in the real world."

The institute can help save companies money in a variety of ways. It takes communication on both ends.

"To keep our commitments, we wanted to make sure we had a pipeline of companies that were going to do projects with us," Ruffing says. "So we needed to think about how we increase our awareness around the state. We've got fairly good visibility, but there's still a lot of pockets out in the state that don't know that this resource exists for them."

Establishing its headquarters at RIT was a no-brainer for the institute, as the school already focuses on helping businesses and entrepreneurs develop—a focus that has grown since P2I's start in 2008.

"RIT is the lead, so the benefit of being here is that (Nabil) Nasr (director of the Golisano Institute for Sustainability) has established this industry outreach... that the other universities around the state don't focus as much on," Ruffing says.

Each partner university is important to the institute and is crucial to its success.

"At our partner universities, and even at places that aren't affiliated with us, there's brilliant people doing really awesome research, but their job when they come in everyday is not to go out and help an industry or a community—whereas our job is," Ruffing says. "And I think that's what the power of being at RIT is for us."

As a leader, Ruffing does not believe in one strategy. Situations and people are constantly evolving, as should a leader.

"The most important thing is that people understand the big picture of why they're being asked to do the things that they're being asked to do," he says. "I think sometimes leaders, if their particular work isn't easily traceable up to the broader organizational goals—they don't take the time to make that connection for folks, and then people don't understand what it is that they're doing."

Throughout the years, Ruffing has been working to help businesses see what he sees: sustainability and sustainable practices save money. The way businesses operate matters. Businesses have not always bought into the idea.

"And all of a sudden there was a critical mass of customer demand for improved environmental performance and all of a sudden the businesses were ringing the phone off the hook, he says.

"I told my wife one day it was like pushing a rail car up a hill for a while and then it topped the hill and started going and we were running to catch it," he adds.

Rochester will remain on Ruffing's radar. He is excited about the community's future.

"P2I is a great resource for companies in New York State and therefore in Rochester," he says. "And we're here to help businesses, help the community here, help the citizens make choices that improve the environment and improve the quality of economic life for the Rochester community."

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