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'Be Bold and Don't Worry So Much,' RCU's Chief Operating & Risk Officer Advises Younger Self

"I strive to bring a positive attitude, high engagement and fun to my role," 17-year RCU team member Mishel Kaufman says.

By **Natasha Chilingerian** | August 21, 2024 at 10:00 AM



Mishel Kaufman cheers on 850 team members at RCU's Day of Impact on Oct. 9, 2023. The group came together to build 418 bikes and donated them to children in the North Bay who needed them. (Credit: Will Bucquoy/Redwood Credit Union)

Name: Mishel Kaufman



Credit union: Redwood Credit Union (\$8.5 billion, Santa Rosa, Calif.)

Title: Chief Operating and Risk Officer

Age: 52

Number of years at current credit union: 17

Educational background: Bachelor of Arts degree in political science and administrative studies from UC Riverside; MBA from Claremont Graduate University; Certified Internal Auditor (CIA) certification through the Institute of Internal Auditors; Credit Union Enterprise Risk Management Expert (CUERME) designation from CUNA

CU Times: What are your key responsibilities in your current role?



Mishel Kaufman

Kaufman: As the Chief Operating and Risk Officer, I get to lead and provide strategic direction for several teams including Member Experience, Community & Government Relations, Marketing, Public Relations & Communications and Enterprise Risk Management. My focus is to ensure we are serving the best interests of our members, team members and communities while proactively adapting to ever-changing regulatory and market conditions.

CU Times: What drew you to the credit union industry?

Kaufman: I was drawn to the credit union industry because of the people. I was a member of Redwood Credit Union and had always



loved the service and noted how much everyone loved working together. Now I know it's RCU's culture and it's based on passion, purpose, people, partnership and performance. Through my 17-year career, it's clear that our industry embodies people helping people.

CU Times: What unique skills, experience and attributes do you bring to your role?

Kaufman: Before joining RCU, I worked in audit and consulting services spanning various industries including public utilities, insurance, high-tech and financial services. It's those experiences that developed my ability to see the big picture and understand the details to bring diverse teams together to implement continuous improvement opportunities. I also believe in balance where we work hard, but also play hard. I strive to bring a positive attitude, high engagement and fun to my role.

CU Times: Which person (or people) do you credit the most for helping and supporting you along your career journey?

Kaufman: My family has been the biggest support in my career journey. And I have two ... my personal family – husband, kids and parents, who have been my biggest cheerleaders and kept me grounded. And my RCU family, from our CEO, who has been a mentor, role model and champion for me, to my executive partners and leaders within our credit union, whom I have the privilege of working beside.

CU Times: What are some of the biggest differences between working in your current executive level role and your previous, non-executive roles?



Kaufman: Besides the expanded responsibilities, one of the biggest differences between executive versus previous non-executive roles is the strength of teamwork and purposefulness. Our executive team works as one to ensure we are prioritizing our people, strategies and focus areas to inspire and lead the whole organization to achieve our goals in alignment with our mission, vision and values.

CU Times: What's a challenge you faced when you first joined your executive team, and how did you overcome it?

Kaufman: One challenge I faced when I first joined the executive team was the overarching impact of my decision making. As an executive I had to change my mindset through more strategic and critical thinking and asking more questions.

CU Times: How would you describe your current leadership style?

Kaufman: I strive to be a strategic and inclusive leader who drives the organization to the next level. I have learned that leadership itself is a journey and a commitment to your organization, your team and yourself. I'm committed to being an even more empathetic leader who continues to evolve every day to meet the ever-changing needs of our members, team members and communities.

CU Times: Do you approach your job any differently now compared to how you did pre-pandemic? If yes, how so?

Kaufman: Yes, the pandemic impacted my approach, as I don't take being in person and working together for granted. I am more focused and intentional on staying connected with our team



members by actively listening, staying attuned and empowering them to take our culture to the next level.

CU Times: What's next for you on your executive career journey? Do you have any specific career goals you're working toward?

Kaufman: Next steps for my executive career journey are to continue my own personal and professional development by asking for feedback, listening and critically thinking about everything in order to ensure we're staying focused on the right things while helping others to be successful.

CU Times: What big-picture impact do you hope to make within your credit union, as well as for your members and community?

Kaufman: I want to continue to inspire our team members by living our purpose to inspire hope and make a positive impact every day. I am deeply committed to furthering RCU's social impact to advancing meaningful, inclusive and sustained change for our members, team members and communities.

CU Times: What career advice would you give your younger self?

Kaufman: I would tell my younger self to be bold and don't worry so much! Have confidence in yourself and enjoy the journey because you'll end up where you're supposed to be.

Would you or someone you know like to share your journey to credit union leadership? Please reach out to Natasha Chilingirian at nchilingirian@cutimes.com. To qualify, the individual must be a part of a credit union's leadership team or C-suite, and have a compelling story to share about their rise to their current leadership role.



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