



# WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Driving innovation and growth in cheese and dairy



## Allison Schuman

is fourth-generation CEO of Schuman Cheese, Fairfield, New Jersey

**Q What do you think are the most important attributes of a leader, and how do you use your role to help direct, motivate and inspire your team and organization?**

**A** I believe the most important attributes are integrity, curiosity, decisiveness and the ability to listen. The best leaders don't assume they have all the answers. Rather, they create an environment where people feel empowered to share ideas, challenge assumptions and give their teams the clarity and confidence to move forward.

At Schuman Cheese, I try to provide clear direction while giving our team the autonomy to determine how we get there. We have incredible expertise throughout the organization, and some of our best ideas come from the people closest to our customers, products and operations. My job is to make sure those perspectives are heard and that we're aligned around a common vision.

**Q Please comment on the significance of taking the reins as CEO in a multi-generational family company? How have your previous roles in the company prepared you to take the lead as CEO?**

**A** Becoming CEO of a company that has been part of my family for four generations is an incredible honor and responsibility. Schuman Cheese was founded by my great-grandfather, Arthur, in 1945, so I grew up understanding that this business represents much more than a company. It represents generations of relationships, hard work, craftsmanship and values.

At the same time, I don't see my role as simply preserving what has been built. It's about helping shape what comes next.

My previous roles gave me the opportunity to understand the business from different perspectives and see how decisions impact our customers, partners and employees. That experience has prepared me to look at the company holistically as CEO.

I'm also fortunate to be part of a

fourth-generation leadership team with my brothers, Ian and Keith. We each bring different strengths to the business, and we're proud of our history while remaining focused on the future.

**Q Thinking of leaders and/or role models you have worked with in the past, what are some strategies you have learned from them and adopted, and what are some things you have tried to avoid?**

**A** I've learned that great leaders know when to listen, when to challenge and when to make the call. The leaders I've admired most build strong relationships and make people feel their contributions matter, but they also create clarity around where the organization is going and what is expected.

I've also learned the importance of staying calm and maintaining perspective. In any business, there will be challenges and unexpected changes, and a leader's response can have a significant impact on the organization.

Something I try to avoid is leading through fear. People should feel comfortable raising concern, asking a difficult question or saying when something isn't working. That's how you identify problems early and ultimately make better decisions.

**Q What advice would you give to young women who are hesitant about pursuing leadership roles in traditionally male-dominated industries?**

**A** Don't wait until you feel completely ready. If you do, you may miss opportunities that could help you grow. Confidence doesn't mean having every answer — it means being willing to ask questions, take on something unfamiliar and learn along the way.

I'd encourage young women to find mentors and sponsors, build real relationships and make their ambitions known. One of the biggest opportunities is to advocate for yourself. Many women fall into the trap of thinking that if they just put their head down and work hard, someone will notice and advocate on their behalf. That doesn't always happen. You have to be comfortable asking for more, letting your ambition be seen and clearly communicating where you want to go.

**Q How do you balance authenticity with professionalism in your leadership style?**

**A** For me, the two aren't mutually exclusive. The strongest leaders are authentic while still holding themselves and their organizations to a high standard.

Growing up in a family business, with the privilege of a lot of long-tenured employees, people have watched me grow up and change — as a person and as a leader. They've seen my successes, but also my failures and missteps. The best advice I ever got was to remember that whether you like it or not, people are always watching.

That comes with a lot of responsibility to show up as the best version of yourself, while also remembering you are human. Being authentic means being honest about who you are, communicating openly and acknowledging when you don't have all the answers. Professionalism means doing all of that with respect, accountability and a focus on the organization.

**Q How do you see women contributing to the dairy industry in areas where they haven't been as visible in the past? How do you think this has changed the industry for the better?**

**A** Women are showing up across every part of the dairy industry — in operations, manufacturing, finance, technology, sales, marketing and executive leadership. And they're not just showing up. They're leading with intention, they're building strong teams and, in my experience, they're relentless about execution.

Dairy has always been an industry rooted in family businesses and long-standing traditions, which is one of its greatest strengths. But that also means the range of voices and perspectives at the table has historically been narrower than it should have been. As more women step into decision-making roles, we're bringing different lenses to how we build brands, how we support our teams, how we think about the consumer and how we run our operations. That diversity of experience doesn't just make individual companies better — it makes the entire industry more resilient and more relevant.

**Q What is a key industry insight you'd share with yourself 10 years ago if you could?**

**A** Make the decision. Earlier in my career, I put a lot of pressure on myself to have every answer before moving forward — to know exactly where something was going, to feel completely certain before I committed to a direction. What I've learned is that waiting for perfect information usually means missing the moment. You don't have to have all the answers. You have to make the best decision you can with the information you have at the time, own it, and move forward.

Not making a decision is still a decision — it's just one made by default. And in a fast-moving industry, that's often the most costly one.

**Q Please share a time when you felt your insights presented a unique solution to a challenge at the company — or a specific new product launch or marketing campaign you were involved with?**

**A** One of the things I've always enjoyed about working at Schuman Cheese is finding new ways to connect our heritage and expertise with how consumers are shopping and eating today.

A specific example I'm particularly proud of is Cello's recent brand refresh. Cello has decades of heritage and craftsmanship behind it, but we saw an opportunity to translate those strengths in a way that felt more relevant to how consumers are discovering, shopping for and enjoying specialty cheese today.

The goal wasn't to change what made Cello special but instead make that value more immediately recognizable. We wanted the brand to feel elevated without feeling exclusive, preserving the quality and craftsmanship behind the cheese while making the experience more approachable and inviting. That thinking informed everything from refreshed packaging to a new brand voice and visual identity.

For me, it reinforced that innovation doesn't always mean reinventing the product. Sometimes the bigger opportunity is understanding what consumers value and finding a more relevant way to connect them with something exceptional that's already there. **CMN**