



Women in Leadership



Their voices, ideas and vision for the future of cheese and dairy.

Pam Hodgson is a certified Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker at Sartori Co., Plymouth, Wisconsin.

Do you feel women in the industry are well-represented in trade organizations, educational content and the media? Where do you see gaps?

While there is more work to do, we are making progress. For example, recently, the Master Cheesemakers logo was rebranded. Originally, the face of the cheesemaker had a full mustache. Today the face in the logo is much more representative of all cheesemakers. This might seem trivial, but images matter both to people who might aspire to become a Master Cheesemaker and to those who buy our products. The marketplace supports female cheesemakers. When I meet with cheese buyers (both category managers and consumers), there is tremendous interest and backing for female cheesemakers.

Right now, there are some fantastic cheeses being made by women! I think that this is encouraging for us all. It makes it easier to say, "If she can do it, I can, too," and know it is true. Industry boards, trade associations and educational opportunities are great vehicles to recognize and promote women in the dairy industry. Our entire dairy community will benefit from including more female leadership in industrywide initiatives.

Who are some dairy industry leaders that inspire you? Have you had any mentors in the industry, and how have they helped you along your career journey?

Without a doubt, my top female mentor was my mom. As a dairy farm family we pulled together, each contributing as they were able. My mom was determined, capable and kind. From her I saw that I didn't need to let others define whom I aspired to be.

Do you feel women in the dairy industry have equal opportunities for advancement relative to their male counterparts?

The dairy industry has come a long way! Earlier in my career, I was often in roles where I was the first woman in a leadership position, and it wasn't always easy. Now it is much more common to accept a woman's talents and contributions. The early adaptors — the organizations that recognized the opportunities to tap talent outside of a narrowly defined talent pool — have enjoyed an advantage which continues in today's tight labor market.

While I started in the dairy industry in 1991, I didn't join Sartori until 2005. The nearly 20 years at Sartori have been a delight. From the day I walked in the door, I felt like my contributions would be rewarded. Sartori has provided an environment where I could thrive and not have to waste energy fighting biases. This increased my productivity and creativity. At Sartori, I have also had the privilege to mentor the next generation of dairy leaders who will achieve more than I have. Being part of the Sartori team is very fulfilling.

What is a strategy you've utilized to make sure you, and other women in your company/organization, are heard?

In *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey writes about "seeking first to understand." Early in my career, not only was I the first woman in a leadership role, but I was also young. Some of the men that I was supervising were old enough to be my father. To tap into all of the expertise and talent of the team, I often approached opportunities with a collaborative style. This served me well. Soon the team recognized that while I was responsible for the final decisions, I would make decisions with their input as well as communicate the logic behind the decisions. Not every decision was popular, but people knew that they were heard and that the decision was made in a thoughtful way. If I made a bad decision, I owned it and adjusted the course based on the new learnings.

My male peers often led with an autocratic style which was more common at the time. While it worked for them, it wouldn't have worked for me. In addition, my teams outperformed the teams being led autocratically. While some might be able to lead

autocratically, I think a collaborative leadership will deliver better results. It's more fun/less stressful to lead collaboratively, too.

Do you see more acceptance of and positions filled by women leaders in the dairy industry now than when you first started? If so, to what do you attribute this?

Early in my career, I often used the mantra of "water will wash away the stone" during difficult situations. It provided motivation to keep doing my best work regardless of barriers or discrimination. The mantra has proven to be true — there are significantly more women in dairy industry positions than ever before. While we don't have equal numbers, especially in higher leadership positions, the trend is definitely positive. There are many reasons for the growth of women in the dairy industry — we had early pioneers who proved that women were capable, many of the opponents of women have retired and their replacements are more aware of the opportunities that a diverse workforce provides. Women bring fresh perspectives and an abundance of talent.

What do you think traditionally has been a barrier to women entering or advancing in the dairy industry? How have women worked to overcome these barriers and build more opportunities for new generations?

The biggest barrier has been denied opportunities. It's hard for people to prove themselves if they never get a chance to show what they can do. For a long time, I put a lot of pressure on myself because I had opportunities that most women do not get. I felt like if I didn't meet high standards, the opponents of diverse workforces would use my mistakes to justify not hiring women in the future. Today, I don't feel the same kind of pressure. While I still strive to do quality work, what drives me is more about doing my part so that the team is successful. There are so many talented women

who are leading the way and I don't feel the same weight.

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

Looking back on my 30-plus-year career, it is possible to see patterns that weren't obvious at the time. Today I can see that many of the people who objected to female leadership were also insecure of their abilities. Perhaps if I could go back, I could find a way to put them more at ease, not by lowering my performance or standards but by helping them raise their game. It can be hard to see the big picture, and I admire people with the emotional intelligence to stay balanced in all circumstances.

Please share a time when you felt your insights presented a unique solution to a challenge at a company or organization?

When I started at Sartori, I was encouraged to experiment and was told that if only one idea out of 20 was successful, it was okay. In the beginning, I doubt that I had that success rate. However, every time that we tried something there were learnings. Eventually, something that we learned from one trial was applicable to some other unrelated opportunity. That's when things really started to happen. Different people shared different perspectives which gave us more ideas to explore which led to more successes. Eventually, I realized that as long as there were learnings, an experiment was a success. Sartori's commitment to innovation is remarkable. When I started working at Sartori, I was a solid cheesemaker. At Sartori, I learned how to be a creative cheesemaker.

How can the industry motivate the next generation of women to pursue a career in dairy?

In the dairy industry we know that cream rises to the top. With opportunity and a collaborative environment, I am confident that the dairy industry will have motivated and successful women leaders. **CMN**