



Women in Leadership

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

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What leadership style do you feel has garnered a positive response throughout your career?

I work primarily with undergraduate students at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, and I serve as a leader to these students in a variety of capacities including as an instructor, as a research mentor, as an advisor or as a coach to various competition teams. My leadership style changes with each of these roles, and my leadership style changes with each student. My general approach is to get to know the student, understand their needs and goals, and try to form my leadership style around that. However, with this demographic, I have never found the hands-off approach to be the proper style, nor do I have the personality to enforce an autocratic leadership style. I tend to be very enthusiastic about dairy foods, and I imagine this passion comes through in my leadership style as well.

Within the lab, I have students who want to work a set schedule and go home on time, while I also have students who want to sleep in the lab to gather data points throughout the night. Similarly, I have students who are outgoing and ooze confidence, whereas other students have a great fear of public speaking. Both of these students have a role in the industry and can succeed with proper leadership, but I have to recognize the discrepancy in their preferences and goals. For the outgoing student who wants to live in the lab, I may lead by giving them opportunities for continuous improvement and pushing them outside of their comfort zone (i.e., transformational leadership) while still checking that they are not overextending themselves. For the quieter student with a set schedule,

I would attempt to inspire and instill confidence through my energy and excitement (i.e., visionary leadership) while still recognizing the importance of their boundaries. I also love pairing these two students together, and I have found that to be very effective and beneficial for both parties.

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?

When I look at my own characteristics, I recognize how I am a blend of traits that I absorbed from mentors along the way. My initial inspiration came from my Ph.D. advisors: Dr. Federico Harte and Dr. John Coupland. They recognized my passion for the field of Food Science and encouraged me to continue my education before I recognized this capacity within myself. I now attempt to teach and guide undergraduate students with the same enthusiasm as Dr. Coupland, and my PowerPoint presentation format and research interests align closely with Dr. Harte's influence. Outside of my advisors, Dr. Kerry Kaylegian, an associate research professor at Penn State, trained me in the sensory evaluation of dairy products for the Collegiate Dairy Products Evaluation Competition, and I now train my students to compete in the same competition. In my experience, the dairy industry is a tight-knit and incredibly supportive community, and I have been inspired by too many industry leaders to list.

Can you please talk about what it means to you to be recognized with the 2024 Carl E. Gulbrandsen Innovators of the Year Award? How does this recognition help to spotlight the work of you and your students?

There is so much amazing research going on within the University of Wisconsin System, and this recognition indicates that my students and I are having a profound impact — likely a bigger impact that we ever could have imagined. Specifically, this project started as a submission for the Dairy Management Inc. New

Product Competition, for which the students developed a high-protein, ginger-coagulated dairy product. The product took home the first-place prize for the competition. However, these students created a product that was so innovative and novel that WiSys suggested it was worthy of intellectual property protection. In other words, these students worked countless hours developing this product and now they took home a first-place prize (with an \$8,000 reward), have a provisional patent, and received the 2024 Carl E. Gulbrandsen Innovators of the Year Award. If that's not inspirational for other students, I do not know what is. I am so excited to see how this group of students progresses through their careers. They are going to do amazing things.

As for me, the goal of my research has always been to innovate for the dairy industry whether that involves evaluating novel processing methods, creating value-added dairy products or finding new avenues to generate revenue from dairy ingredients. I started in this position three years ago, and I have received a lot of positive feedback on my work. Receiving this award alongside my students is something I will remember throughout my career, and I cannot fully express the value of giving a young faculty member so much encouragement. I am motivated and inspired.

How can the industry motivate the next generation of women to pursue a career in dairy? What are some of the challenges and opportunities you have observed in your roles at the university level?

Within academia, there are more female students than male students, but the demographic shifts for many dairy-related careers. What I see at the university level is that students who are the most outspoken get the most recognition and the most opportunities. However, the students who are the most outspoken tend to be upperclassmen (i.e., comfortable with their surroundings) and not in a minority group (e.g., international students). Now imagine a new female employee within a male-dominated room. Without this vocalization, despite how efficient and successful this individual might be in their job, they may not be provided the same

opportunities as their counterpart.

With this, I think one approach is to give them opportunities. In education, we always talk about high-impact education practices including undergraduate research, active learning, study abroad and so on. We talk about these practices much less when individuals start their careers. The truth is, employees are still looking for opportunities to travel to conferences, to participate in workshops and short courses, and to have diversified experiences within their career. There are so many amazing high-impact opportunities for women within dairy-related careers, and it is important to encourage female employees to get involved in these networks. Of course, I do not intend to oversimplify these issues, as there could be many other factors at play including gender bias, varying expectations, maternity and pregnancy discrimination, and other institutionally-centered problems, but I can offer one approach on how to inspire the next generation of women.

This is unrelated, but I also try to motivate my students through my genuine enthusiasm for this industry. I think that positive energy can be contagious and inspirational.

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

I often look at the position I am in and the recognition I have received, and I am genuinely dumbfounded. When I first started at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls as an assistant professor, I was 25 years old. I made a big point in the first class to say: "I know I don't look like it, but I swear I have a Ph.D., and I swear I am supposed to be here." But, honestly, I did not have to worry about that at all because I have these amazing students who could not care less about my age. Instead, they were just looking for a mentor to provide opportunities, and they took advantage of those opportunities. I also did not have to worry because I would find amazing collaborators and gain the support of groups like the Dairy Innovation Hub, my department, WiSys, industry partners and many others. Considering this, what I would say to myself 10 years ago is that passion, enthusiasm and curiosity will take you a long way, and that this passion should never be concealed. CMN