



Legacy & Leadership

Neal Schuman has served since 1985 as CEO of Schuman Cheese, a fourth-generation family-owned specialty cheese company headquartered in Fairfield, New Jersey.

Under Schuman's leadership, the company currently is the 17th largest privately-held company in New Jersey with 1,300 employees and has grown to more than \$650 million in revenue. Schuman Cheese is recognized globally as a leading U.S. cheesemaker specializing in Italian and mountain cheeses and also is a large importer of cheeses from around the world.

Schuman Cheese has received numerous national and international first place awards in hard Italian cheese, soft cheese and alpine cheeses. The company also is known for its innovations in the cheese and snack space. In addition to its cheese business, approximately three years ago Schuman Cheese created a business unit to produce, market and sell Cello Whisps. Sticking to Schuman Cheese's core purpose, this item is made with Schuman's award-winning cheeses today. Earlier this year, Schuman Cheese spun off a majority share to Kainos Capital to provide the additional capital to further grow this business.

Schuman and his wife, Liz, have three children, Allison, Ian and Keith, all three of whom have joined the family business. Allison is the senior director of sales; Ian is the import business manager; and Keith is a risk management analyst and an important leader in Schuman's cheese and dairy consulting business, Optimally.

Q What advice would you give someone going into a leadership position for the first time?

A The most important thing for a new leader to do is be himself or herself. People know when leaders are being disingenuous. I would also recommend that a new leader understand they do not have all the answers and should encourage their team to make meaningful suggestions.

Q What is one characteristic that you believe every leader should possess?

A While there are many styles and ways, every leader should be an effective communicator.

Q What is the biggest challenge facing the dairy industry today?

A While I am sure others will trend toward saying plant-based products and the lack of clear-cut labeling rules, I believe it is our lack of a cohesive trade policy that doesn't allow us to invest in emerging markets.

Q Please comment on the importance of accuracy, product quality and reputation to the longevity of a business.

A Very simply, businesses know what the right thing is to do. They need to practice it every day and instill that value to every person in their company.

Q What are the most important decisions you made/have made as a leader of your company?

A I have been in our company for 47 years. I have made many good and bad decisions. The most important decision I have made was to realize what I don't know and to leave those decisions to people with more knowledge.

Q How do you encourage creative thinking within your organization?

A Encouraging creative thinking is an everyday discipline. It starts with your core values, builds with a culture that encourages free thinking and ends with the way you reward people in the company that exhibit a passion for creativity.

Q How do you communicate your company's "core values" and encourage others to do the same?

A Our core values are prominently displayed in every office. We discuss our core values in town hall meetings that bring our staff together periodically throughout the year, and we consistently review our progress to ensure perfect clarity. Our values are also regularly conveyed in our interaction with prospective employees, customers, partners and others in the industry, as well as being a highlighted area of our website.

Q What was an obstacle you faced for your business and how did you overcome it?

A An early obstacle to Schuman Cheese's growth was the amount of quota we had to import our cheeses; our only path to growth was additional market access measures. So, we spent an inordinate amount of time with international trade agreements and working with USDA and the U.S. Trade Representative to find solutions that were good for both importers and U.S. producers.

Q They say "you learn from your mistakes" ... please share an example where this was relevant for you?

A We take pride in having an innovative culture. But, with innovation comes regular failure. If an innovation team has two winners in ten, they deserve to be in the Innovation Hall of Fame. We encourage three things: Do a Post Action Review. Fail Fast. Fail Cheaply.

Q What has been your favorite thing about working in the cheese and dairy industry?

A I am still passionate about the outstanding products that we produce and the many great people that share that passion around the world.

Q What are some of the key concepts that supported the long-term success of your company?

A Find great partners, both customers and vendors, that share your values. Always try to produce the best product in its class. Find great people to work in our company and remember we are all a part of bigger community and we have a role in making people better.

Q How has social media and electronic communications changed the way people do business?

A Social media allows levels of transparency into our businesses. We are thrilled that people can access information about who we are and why our products taste so great. Having the ability to talk to consumers directly and easily is a powerful tool.

Q Please tell us about a favorite product or marketing campaign your company rolled out under your leadership. What made it special?

A I take the most pride in the efforts we have made with the hard cheese sector. We have enhanced every day eating with our Parmigiano Reggiano programs, and the outstanding copper vat cheese we produce.

Q What would you cite as an example of a time where your company showed innovation and leadership in the dairy marketplace?

A Our 100% cheese snack, Whisps, showed both our innovation capabilities and showed our consumers a different way to use and eat cheese.

Q Please discuss the benefits of collaboration among industry leaders versus the need to "protect your brand."

A There is no brand growth without a dynamic growing marketplace. Properly organized collaboration at all levels provides the foundation that allows for successful development of all types of programs.

Q What, in your opinion, does the dairy industry need to do to attract the next generation of leaders?

A Show growth, make even greater tasting products, adapt to trends, open more export markets, adapt to millennial behaviors and stop supporting old failed policies that don't create a dynamic global market.