



# Legacy & Leadership

**Jeff Giffin**, executive director and chairman of the board for Masters Gallery Foods Inc., comes from a family that has been in the cheese business for many generations. He follows in the footsteps of his great-grandfather James Giffin (Valley House Cheese Factory in 1883), grandfather Stuart J. Giffin (manager of A and P Cheese Company), and his father Stuart M. Giffin (quality and procurement manager, A and P Cheese). Giffin's brother, Stuart J. Giffin, also in the dairy business, retired as director of manufacturing for Land O'Lakes.

Jeff Giffin is a 1976 University of Wisconsin graduate with a bachelor of food science degree. He started his career in 1977 in Carthage, Missouri, at the Safeway Stores cheese facility and moved through the company in several positions until leaving in 1983 to become procurement manager for Dorman Cheese in Monroe, Wisconsin.

In 1987, Giffin became director of procurement for a newly merged company, Dorman Roth Foods in Moonachie, New Jersey. He furthered his education at Northwestern-Kellogg Graduate School with a master's degree in business management in 1989.

1990 marked a career change to Masters Gallery Foods Inc. as vice president of procurement and later included industrial sales duties. Giffin was promoted to president/CEO of Masters Gallery Foods in 2006, a role he held until 2017 when Jeff Gentine assumed the leadership role.

Masters Gallery Foods Inc. grew substantially under Giffin's leadership from \$200 million in sales to an excess of a \$1 billion during that 10-year period. Giffin currently is executive director and chairman of the board for Masters Gallery Foods Inc. and has served on various boards and committees and in many capacities for the Wisconsin Dairy Products Association, Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association, National Cheese Institute and the International Dairy Foods Association.

Giffin has been married to his wife Kathi since 1981 and has one daughter, Amanda Giffin, who has stayed in the food business. A UW graduate, Amanda is a registered certified dietician and currently is a diabetes educator for Aurora Healthcare.

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

**A** Listen more and speak less. You should encourage feedback and allow other's ideas to help you in your day-to-day duties. Know the background of any reports as it is very easy to have data present a picture that is not totally correct.

In the end, respect your feelings and strongly consider your gut.

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

**A** Making decisions quickly on the minor things that come up. This allows you to demonstrate decisiveness to your employees and, more importantly, leaves valuable time for the big decisions. Remember "indecision is a decision." And, try to sincerely listen to your employees and ask for their help to solve problems.

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

**A** Your company cannot be successful without a great reputation; it must be protected every day in all areas — in quality, in customer relations, in employee treatment and, many times overlooked, in timely remittance to your vendors. The old adage that "your word is your bond" might be even more important today than in the past.

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

**A** Two things come to mind. One is to create a culture that constantly strives for improvement and takes the time to celebrate the progress and the successes.

The second is one to which I must give credit to my brother, Stuart Giffin. He has always said, "surround yourself with aces." So, hire the best people, treat them well and do not be afraid if they are

smarter than you are. Be serious about work and serious about having fun.

**Q** How do you encourage creative thinking within your organization?

**A** Creative thinking comes about by sharing problems with employees, allowing and encouraging them to try solutions without fear of reprisal or "Monday morning quarterbacking." If you never make a mistake, are you really doing anything to improve the business? Be creative and "push the envelope."

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

**A** By daily example! Employees will quickly see through decisions and measure them to the company core values.

If decisions are made that do not follow these values, both short term or long term, for any reason but especially financial, it will be very transparent.

When decisions are made that reinforce the company core values, the company will become more aligned with these values. The leader's example will be exemplified through the performance of the team.

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

**A** Social media has significantly sped up the "clock speed" of the organization.

Ideas, thoughts, etc. are "aired" in the public domain and "comments and likes" shape the public's opinion of an event. Quick, honest, responses to issues are paramount to success in this new environment.

On the business front, emails are used to communicate and sometime are a means to avoid issues that possibly could be solved with a face-to-face meeting or a phone call. This medium is great for documenting conversations but intonation and body language, very important in my opinion, are lost.

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

**A** The people. This industry is very unique as multiple companies work hard on common problems. They accomplish success by sharing expertise in structured environments such as trade groups and by the simple but extremely important socialization and discussion with peers. Less email, more face time.

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

**A** Respect for all entities and all people. You need to visualize a problem from both sides, not just your side. There has to be success for both parties if an agreement is meant to last over time. The old cliché of win/win is the only way to succeed.

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

**A** The "old guard" needs to let go and give increasing responsibilities to the next generation of leaders. They need to be able to make mistakes and more importantly learn from these mistakes. Leaders are made from increasing responsibility, and eventually, problem-solving and decision making become second nature. Lead through example and delegation, monitor progress, discuss failures and recognize/acknowledge success.

**Q** Have you fostered certain habits throughout your career that have encouraged/promoted your company's success?

**A** I think I have fostered a culture of serious business goals and success but hopefully not lost sight of fun and family. The price to be paid for success should not be at the expense of family and friends.

Success is difficult and fleeting, and it needs to be celebrated.

Remember "the journey is the reward." **CMN**