



# Legacy & Leadership

**Loren Corle** was teaching industrial welding at a local technical college in 1982. With a decrease in enrollment, Corle was notified he would be laid off at the end of the school year. Subsequently Corle began what he believed to be a three-month summer job at a local cheese plant helping to do several piping and welding jobs. Seeing opportunity, within a year, Corle started his own company that today is RELCO LLC, located in Willmar, Minnesota.

What began as an informal team of four welding friends has grown in 38 years. Today, with a team of engineers, scientists and technical specialists (as well as welders), RELCO provides process technologies to dairy plants across the globe and on six continents. In addition to its headquarters in Minnesota, RELCO established subsidiary offices in The Netherlands in 2007, New Zealand in 2011 and Brazil in 2014.

RELCO also has made several successful acquisitions to broaden its geographical and/or product line offerings. Among those, RELCO purchased the assets of Whey Systems in 2000, Wet&Dry Technologies in 2007, Savel Technologies in 2009, and acquired the line of cheesemaking equipment from Stoelting in 2012.

Most of RELCO's business today is supplying equipment and systems for dairy liquid processing, cheesemaking, evaporation, drying, and powder storage and packaging.

**Q** How is the dairy industry uniquely positioned as an essential industry to feed the nation and world during the COVID-19 crisis?

**A** Governmental actions taken in attempts to deal with the COVID-19 virus treat everyone within their jurisdictions as if we are all the same. However, we are all individuals living with unique situations. As with any threat to one's individual health, the best defense is to be as healthy as possible to begin with and then make good personal decisions concerning one's own risk level. A large part of being as healthy as possible is to practice healthy habits and eat nutritious foods. That is where dairy comes in. I have always been proud of being a supplier to those companies that feed the world with nutrient-rich foods that promote good health.

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

**A** Get yourself firmly grounded with a philosophical basis from which to make business (and personal) decisions. As a leader, you will be challenged in many ways you cannot yet imagine. With a grounding in rational, unchanging values, decisions will be much easier to make, and you will be much better equipped to avoid emotional decisions and rash reactions that will compromise your leadership.

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

**A** There are many characteristics that are important, and the degree one practices them will determine in large part the degree of one's success as a leader. But I believe the most important characteristic is to be unwavering in recognizing reality. This may seem obvious but sometimes needs restatement. Avoiding what is real and refusing to accept it spells doom. This is especially true when negative events occur. Reality is that bad things will happen outside your control. Many times it is not your fault, but it is your problem. Reality is that we are all fallible. Sometimes it is your fault (or your company's fault) and it should be nobody else's problem. Accepting this is the first step to properly dealing with the challenge. Stand up and take the arrows in the chest. Wear them proudly, for you deserve them. And people will respect you for taking them.

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

**A** Many years ago I heard someone say that "you are only as good as your last project." I believe that is so true for someone in the project business like mine. All the marketing money in the world will only influence those that don't know you from past experience, and this dairy industry is way too small to burn bridges.

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

**A** The tough ones. I once went to my father many years ago for some advice. I don't recall the issue any longer as it is probably 40 years ago now, but I do recall his advice clearly. I described my dilemma and offered him the two alternative directions to proceed that I was struggling with. We visited for a few minutes as he gathered a bit more information from me. Then he asked me, "Is there one option that is a lot easier than the other?" When I told him "yes" and it was the first option, he said, "Well then obviously the best direction is the second option or you wouldn't be agonizing over this issue. You know the right answer, now all you have to do is execute it." He was right. I knew the right decision, it was just hard to do it.

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

**A** In 2005 we were looking for opportunities to expand internationally. We believed there was significant opportunity for our products in Europe, and the dairy industry there is nearly twice as large as the dairy industry in the United States. But there were significant barriers to entry into that market. We needed boots on the ground and bricks and mortar on the land. And there were a lot of things to learn. We did research on potential EU partners and kept our eyes open for the right opportunity. When it presented itself in 2007, we bought plane tickets, made appointments with legal and accounting companies there, and began to learn. There is nothing like first-hand involvement and personal understanding. It was also critical we become associated with the right kind of people as they would be our face to the customer. We spent a great deal of time there getting to know them so we could be assured that they shared our values and company culture. We have since applied this approach to expand into New Zealand and South America, and the model has worked. We have good, local people that we trust.

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

**A** Wow! I have made a lot of these. I find myself saying "I shan't do that again" far more often than I would like. The mistakes that first come to mind are still too painful to share.

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

**A** I have always been drawn more to small towns and rural settings that fit perfectly with where cows are and where dairy and cheese plants typically are. I have also found most of the people involved in the dairy industry have a greater share of what can be called "common sense." For example, they know a hungry belly does not create food, production does. They also know production can only occur with work; and work is a good thing. I like that.

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

**A** For over 25 years we have been internally promoting our four "operating values." We talk about them frequently, train new people on them and measure our performance on them through Key Performance Indicators. Those values in priority order are: #1 Safety — we deliver products and services that respect the safety of our customers, employees and other stakeholders. #2 Quality — we deliver what we said we would deliver. #3 Schedule — we deliver when we said we would deliver. And #4 Budget — we deliver at a cost to provide the company a return. Everyone in the company knows that on any operating decision, if any two of these values appear to be in conflict with each other, they are pre-authorized to choose the higher one and proceed. **CMN**