



Women in Leadership



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

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In an industry with continuous innovation, what inspires you to think creatively and foster creativity among your employees?

I source creativity from multiple places in a very dynamic environment. Talking with employees at the plant and in the office, listening to their ideas or discoveries, talking with customers and asking them what they see and need, listening to consumers whether it is through a formal survey or impromptu conversations. We are immersed in the world of delicious food, so eating, grazing at local markets and tasting in a new restaurant are all parts of feeding my creative mind. My role as a leader is to create an environment where people feel empowered to bring new ideas and ways of working forward. I am very intentional on how I respond in those moments to help build up on the idea, using phrases like “yes and,” and helping connect those thoughts to our broader strategy and mission. Innovation is one of our five core values at Vermont Creamery, and so walking the talk is where it starts for me.

Is there a product or service you were involved with launching at your company that you're particularly proud of?

All our new products and platform launches are a team effort — the two that come to mind are the launch of our soft-ripened aged cheese portfolio with geotricum rind. The market was very niche, and technical expertise in the U.S. for soft-ripened geo-rinded cheese was nonexistent — not to mention we didn't have the infrastructure to make it consistently. But despite all the reasons not to do it, we (Bob Reese, Allison Hooper and I) led with our gut and passion, believing we could create this category and convince American consumers to give them a try. Those instincts were fueled by our experiences traveling in Europe and especially in France where the majority of goat cheese is consumed aged. We also received positive support from our customers as we were exploring the idea. We built a state-of-the-art aging facility, launched four distinct cheeses, gained the support from mongers and press — and the rest is history. It took almost 10 years to get the

recipe just right, but this is an important lesson about pioneering a category and risk taking.

The other important project was our B Corp certification that I led in partnership with Matt Reese, our director of finance. We knew that our mission is core to our sustainable business model and wanted to ensure we created a formal review process against best-in-class standards for social and environmental responsibility. We achieved B Corp certification in 2014, becoming one of the first 1,000 companies worldwide, along with Ben & Jerry's and Patagonia-like businesses. Since then, we have been using the B Corp assessment program as our guardrail for our short and long term impact strategy as well as collaborating with other B Corp companies to share innovative ways to use business as a force for good.

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

I have had the chance to work with terrific leaders and teams during my career. Our co-founders Bob Reese and Allison Hooper taught me at an early stage in my career the value of empowerment, innovation and entrepreneurship. I would see them lead with deep care and empathy for their employees, farmers, community and customers — placing a great amount of emphasis on people. This exposure has had an immense impact on how I have developed my own leadership style over the years. I also have appreciated learning from a new set of leaders — such as Beth Ford, CEO of Land O'Lakes, and Heather Anfang, senior vice president of Dairy Foods at Land O'Lakes — who have influenced my strategic thinking, broadening my view outside of the specialty segment we are in. Finally, the teams that I have had the chance to work with over the years have had a deep impact on my leadership style, from my direct reports to people throughout our organization. I learned the meaning of leading by example, transparency and authenticity, and leaning into your super powers, which for me is empathy.

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

Listen, be present, understand and appreciate where people are at, and follow through. Vermont Creamery's leadership team is 50% female, and the overall company is at 36%. We continue to work toward creating gender balance throughout our management and produc-

tion teams through intentionality and specific strategies. Our focus is offering a flexible workplace that is supportive of all.

This can be done in various ways; in manufacturing, for example, we have started a new program called “flex manufacturing” where an employee can choose to work four hours/day and pick the hours worked. We have installed a lactation pod in our plant to support nursing mothers with a private space. We also have been actively engaged with Let's Grow Kids to work on a bill that passed in 2021 to create a pathway for Vermont to become first in the nation to offer universal child care. Those are some examples of our focus in bringing more women to the workforce.

Tell me about your path to achieving a leadership role at Vermont Creamery. What are some valuable insights you learned along the way from those around you?

“Go get it” is my response to how you can grow. I have had the unique experience to live this throughout my 20 years of experience. Each job I have held after being a cheesemaking intern have been roles that didn't exist in the business — like operations manager, general manager or president. I have focused on helping make the company better, jumping on new initiatives, working beyond silos and job descriptions, being self-taught and surrounding myself with strong CEO peer groups in the industry and in the state of Vermont.

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

We have work to do to not only convince women to join the dairy industry but also make the dairy industry accessible to women. Getting more women in leadership roles is essential; so many have paved the way, yet only a small percentage of the top 10 dairy companies in the U.S. are run by a female CEO. The specialty industry has some great history of women pioneers and leaders. Take the goat cheese segment, which was founded by a group of women — Mary Keen of Cypress Grove, Allison Hooper of Vermont Creamery, Laura Cheneil. Today, those three companies are still led by women. A coincidence? Maybe. A group of women pioneers paving the way for others? Absolutely.

We need to tell the stories of female farmers, cheesemakers, marketers and CEOs loudly so young professional women can see themselves and their future through those stories.

What are some unique perspectives that you and/or other women in the industry have brought to their positions?

I see the next generation of women leaders in the cheese industry taking charge and leading with a sense of legacy. I had the chance to have women and men pave the way for me, and it is time for me to pave the way for others. I also see that leadership can be a lonely role and so leaning into the women in the cheese community has been an incredible gift for me and my peers. Someone once told me “It can be lonely at the top, but you don't have to be alone,” and it's so true. Over the past decade I have formed incredible friendships with other females in our specialty food segment — customers, retailers, business leaders — which has been foundational to my leadership style and resiliency. I think women lifting women is our best opportunity in this industry. Women buyers, women CEOs, women cheesemakers, women farmers — the industry is full of incredible stories of resilience, of growth, results and leadership.

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

My biggest mentor is Allison Hooper, our co-founder. She paved the way for me and helped me grow from doer to leader, first-time mother and life juggler. Along with Allison, I admire all the pioneers that had a vision for building the artisan cheese movement in the U.S., starting a business from scratch and placing it all on the line, raising children, convincing buyers that great artisan cheeses don't all have to be imported from Europe. It takes incredible grit and resilience to go through this. I am in awe, I am inspired and I am fired up by them.

I am inspired by many other great female leaders in the industry as well as the women of Vermont Creamery; they are amazing individuals who do it all. They juggle so much, like being a single mother and plant supervisor. These are women who keep reinventing themselves in their career even after 20+ years in our business, such as a young mother who is also a cancer survivor, and a woman who started as a coordinator and now sits on the executive leadership team. They are women who show up, eager to grow, learn and put themselves forward.

My role is to empower them, and my commitment is to support them. CMN