



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 those in your organization?

Being innovative, creative and willing to adopt new practices and technologies is at the core of U.S. dairy's success, both on and off the farm. For dairy in general, and certainly in the U.S., technology drives innovation and is critical to our growth and ability to remain productive and efficient. Technology allows our smaller and mid-size dairies to be competitive and stay in business.

For example, robotics and other technologies have been lifesavers for some because of labor issues and other complicating factors.

Dairy Management Inc. (DMI), our parent company, has a team constantly looking at the latest science on all fronts across our industry — from sustainability to nutrition and certainly on-farm work through its FARM (Farmers Assuring Responsible Management) program and other partnerships.

On the processing side, our members are looking for ways to be more efficient and make improvements to their products, such as packaging, that will make us even more competitive around the world.

Is there a campaign, program or facet of the U.S. Dairy Export Council you were involved with launching that you're particularly proud of?

U.S. dairy has had three record-setting consecutive years of growth, and the U.S. Dairy Export Council (USDEC) has been a catalyst to that growth, and that's been an exciting ride!

I've been really excited about the many new products that have come from listening to our customers around the world and incorporating local tastes and cultural preferences, often using U.S. dairy ingredients.

I'm also excited about seeing growth in markets where we may have had a small presence. Chile comes to mind, where we've intro-

duced some of our great cheeses, as does the Middle East-North Africa. Our overseas offices have developed hundreds of recipes featuring cheeses in local cuisines.

Opening up our U.S. Center for Dairy Excellence in Singapore was also a big deal for USDEC and the industry. I'm thrilled to see what our elevated presence in that critical market can do for U.S. dairy export value and volume.

Speaking of volume, Mexico has consistently been the No. 1 or No. 2 U.S. dairy export market on a volume and dollar-sales basis. But frankly, I think we should own all of the Americas, not just Mexico.

There's a lot of interest in U.S. products in other countries in the Americas. I already mentioned Chile — but there's Central America, Peru, Colombia and maybe even Brazil at some point. So there's a lot of opportunity right here in our hemisphere, where we don't face as many shipping woes trying to cross an ocean.

Not all of those things were started on my watch, but the seeds had been planted, and we were able to watch them flourish and grow.

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

I've certainly tried to be the leader I would enjoy working for. In a nutshell, I've tried to be someone who listens to learn, is fair, is decisive and will make a decision once the input is gathered and help folks move forward.

As a leader, I think it is important to be brave and bold when you need to be; be decisive, make decisions, motivate, encourage and empower — all the things I have learned from great bosses over my career. So I try to be the best of all those different people I've worked for and think about what motivated me, what encouraged me and how I got to where I am.

I want to groom the next set of people who can lead this organization, our industry and our country. I really do try to surround myself with the best people. I try to listen to them, trust them, respect them and sometimes get out of their way so they can do their jobs and do them well. It has served me very well to have that kind of attitude — to be confident and to trust others. People know I have their backs, and I encourage them to keep growing. We're only going to be successful if we're leaders, not followers.

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

This is a lifelong journey for me. This is something I've cared about even as a very young staffer on Capitol Hill many moons ago.

Diversity of thought is huge for me. Certainly, I want people of color, people from different parts of the world, people of different ages, tall people, short people — and women! Women are often the leaders in agriculture, whether they're given credit or not. They're doing the backbreaking work in the field or the mind-bending work in an office. They care about food. They care about nutrition. They care about where that food comes from and who's sourcing it.

Their voices are critical to the success of our industry. I think of Marilyn Hershey, chair of DMI, and how critical she is to the industry. (DMI board member and treasurer) Joanna Shipp is another name that comes to mind. There are so many women in dairy who are doing outstanding work on the farm and leading organizations.

And we clearly have that at USDEC. We have a very strong repertoire of seasoned leaders. We have some young women coming up that I'm very excited about. They'll be the next generation of leaders in dairy. I want to create a space so they can flourish, they can grow, learn, share, and they're empowered to speak up.

Please share a time when you felt your insights presented a unique solution to a challenge at your organization.

There have been a lot of challenges. Coming out of COVID, with mixed economic recovery across the world and inflation, I tried to draw on my experience in government and the private sector. I tried looking at the situation holistically, thinking about the short term and playing for the long haul. For me, the question was: How can we be ready for customers with products that help us get through these tough times and be prepared for better times in the future?

I believe my whole career has been spent not overreacting, not panicking, but really planning, having a vision for the future, being that Steady Eddie, being that constant.

People have called me a rock because I don't get excited. I stay calm. I stay focused. I look at where I want to be and

then at how I will get there. And I do the same for the organization. Where do we need to be if we're going to continue to export and grow our numbers? What are the things that we have to do to reach those goals?

Even during rocky and challenging times, you still have to do the work. You've still got to make those investments. You've still got to be committed to those solutions and hopefully those outcomes.

What do you feel are the most important qualities of a successful leader?

I think a lot of qualities are critical. Fairness is one that comes to mind — somebody who does not jump to conclusions, does not show favorites, but sees all sides.

Curiosity. You know, you ask questions, dig deeper, and get others talking and thinking.

Compassion for all those around you. Being able to empower and motivate others is really important for a leader. Not just doing it yourself but having others want to do it for all the right reasons. And seeing that excitement, seeing that ownership is something I think is important for a leader.

Another quality of a successful leader is always being a good listener. As I said earlier, listening to learn. I think it's really important to make sure you're not always preaching. You're not always teaching. You're learning.

It's important for a leader to be decisive. Somebody's got to say, "It's going to be this way. I've heard everybody, I've heard all the arguments, all the different points, but we're going in this direction. This is the priority." Somebody has to be able to do that. Or you're just floundering and your organization does not grow.

At USDEC, we are data-based. We're numbers-based. Folks ask me, what percentage of U.S. milk production are we exporting this year? Did our cheese numbers grow? How much are we exporting to this particular country? What is the U.S. Center for Dairy Excellence in Singapore delivering? We're so data-number-driven. But somebody really has to be able to say, "These are the priorities. This is the direction we need to go."

Trust your gut, make the investments and go forward.

I think being a good partner is also important. Bring others in when you need help. Don't be too bold or arrogant that you don't ask for help when you need it. Be confident enough to say, "I got this, but I might need a little help." CMN