



Women in Leadership



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

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

I don't believe any job on the team is beneath me. I recall a time shortly after I took an operations role at a cheese factory. One of the small horizontal tanks had a mechanical issue. I, along with a veteran operator with a wiry six-foot frame, set about getting it fixed. Imagining how he'd have to contort himself to fit inside the confined space, I offered to go in. "No," he scoffed. "By the time I get in, get it fixed and get out, you'll still be doing the paperwork." He was right. But the offer to do whatever it took earned me respect among the operators.

In my current role, there was a day recently when all of our writing staff was off. I could have said, "I'm not a writer, I'm an economist." But I rolled up my sleeves and pitched in to the best of my ability. While it wasn't done as fast as the regular staff, it did get done. I learned what it takes to do the work others do and am a better manager for it. I can understand their perspective and better advocate for their needs. And, again, doing whatever it took earned me the respect and confidence of my team.

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

The common theme among individuals I find inspiring is their ability to communicate effectively. As a young professional at Kraft Foods, I saw John Kennedy's excellent rapport with everyone — from hourly operators to plant managers to senior vice presidents — and how he was able to effectively influence them. How did he do it? John's background in plant operations allowed him to understand more about the supply chain and personally relate to the challenges people faced. It was John's example that inspired me to seek out a role in operations so I could build that same rapport with people.

As a woman in leadership, Sheryl Meshke at Associated Milk Producers Inc. (AMPI) inspires me, in that there is only a career ceiling if you allow there to be one. Sheryl is an excellent communicator, whether to AMPI's dairy producer members or a member of Congress. I admire her leadership

at the cooperative, her willingness to make hard decisions for the benefit of the membership and her genuine commitment to our industry. Sheryl inspires me to continue to grow as a leader and not limit my career potential.

Finally, every day I am privileged to work with one of the best communicators I've ever known, Phil Plourd. Those of us in the dairy industry for any length of time have seen Phil give outlook presentations or read his writings, chuckling along the way at a witty turn of phrase, while learning in the process. He's taken the red pen to my work many times, and I'm a much better writer for it. His coaching to take a risk on the first draft rings in my mind every day. "Don't be boring" is wise counsel. Phil inspires me to connect with my audience and deliver valuable content clearly and concisely.

Do you feel women in the dairy industry have equal opportunities for advancement relative to their male counterparts?

I've never felt that my gender limited my opportunities for advancement. I give a lot of credit to my mother, who was my role model and instilled in me a strong sense of self-confidence. She worked on the farm side-by-side with my father. She hauled hay wagons and made dinner. She had her CDL and drove the semi. So, I didn't see limits based on gender.

But I will say that there are still some hurdles that require women to advocate for themselves. Shortly after starting work at the cheese plant, I had a conversation with the maintenance manager over a comment he made. I clarified that yes, I can type and I am happy to offer that skill to help the team. But I wasn't there to be the secretary, and I was going to be on the floor to help him take apart the separator. After standing up for myself and clarifying expectations, we had an amiable working relationship.

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

There's not a single home-run solution to being heard. I prefer a series of base hit strategies:

- Build your network. No one can be in every meeting or on every email chain, so it takes teamwork to advance ideas and get things done. My network is both inside and outside Ever.Ag, allowing me to learn new things and share appropriately.

- Find a mentor. Part of building your network is connecting with more senior staff. I've found having a mentor to be a great way to test ideas and strategize how to solve problems. Ever.Ag didn't have a formal mentor program when I started, and I'm proud to say that I was part of the team that launched the one we offer today.

- Speak up. As simple as it may sound, no one hears your thought if it never leaves your head. I still toss out bad ideas, but I learn from them. And I hope it creates an environment where people feel comfortable offering their input and builds their confidence to share. As we all toss ideas into the pool, others on the team can build on them and make an idea even better.

- Know your audience. I'm an analytical communicator — I like facts and figures. But not everyone is, so I adjust my style to my audience. In general, I've found that more senior leaders need me to get to the point quickly and concisely.

What do you think traditionally has been a barrier to women entering or advancing in the dairy industry? How have women worked to overcome these barriers and build more opportunities for new generations?

I was privileged to attend the International Dairy Foods Association's (IDFA) Women's Summit in Washington, D.C., which offered excellent training in developing leadership and influence. As I was listening to comments from the Canadian Ambassador, a member of Congress and other influential women inside the Beltway, I realized that I, like many women, suffer from "imposter syndrome." We think we must be completely, 100% prepared for the role we are stepping into, or we feel like a phony and doubt our abilities. The contrast was made that men in a similar situation are equally unprepared, but they jump into the role with confidence and gusto.

An early motto I adopted that helped me overcome the imposter syndrome is, "Do it afraid." Just because you feel fear doesn't mean you should stop. For example, taking an operations role was scary and a real stretch for me. But the day I started, I gave myself a pep talk as I walked into the plant. Foremost Farms believed in me enough to give me the opportunity. I was working with a supportive and knowledgeable plant management team. A mistake is not fatal. I was there to learn and help make the plant better.

Building confidence in young women will help them step forward, advocate for themselves and say "yes" to new opportunities. Simply knowing that the imposter syndrome is real and that feeling afraid is normal helped me reset my expectations. I don't need to be 100% prepared, but I need to be 100% prepared to learn.

What is a key industry insight you'd share with yourself 10 years ago if you could?

If I could share some advice with myself a decade ago, I'd encourage myself to enter difficult conversations early and often. My instinct used to be to calculate the risk of conflict versus the reward of resolving the issue. As I look back, I put too much weight on avoiding the conflict, thinking it would blow up or I would hurt people's feelings. Now, obviously, it's important to go into crucial conversations with sensitivity and from a place of good intentions. But looking back, I wish I hadn't avoided the difficult discussions but had instead had the small dialogues right away to address issues before they got bigger.

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

Stepping into an operational role, I had to learn things like safety protocols for ammonia refrigeration and confined spaces, as well as quality expectations for SQF certification and product traceability. The more I learned about the plant, the more I saw that my staff needed to know the details, too. How was I going to share the information with them? I couldn't shut the plant down for an hour-long training on ammonia safety and evacuation procedures. So, I proposed "Ten Minute Trainings." Working with my QA supervisor and safety coordinator, we developed one-page trainings on each topic of interest. Supervisors would spend 10 minutes with individual operators going over the worksheet, and both would sign it when the training was completed. It served multiple purposes: first, the employees learned valuable information about quality and safety topics; second, relationships between supervisors and employees improved; and third, in the event of disciplinary action, we had documentation of training. Our team won a company award for this, and other plants subsequently adopted it. CMN