



Women in Leadership



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

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

That the main commonality that ties every dairy farm, dairy processor and dairy warehouse together is a robust workforce. And the need to find ways to overcome the obstacles that women face in the workforce. The pandemic was especially hard on women. The statistics are staggering. During the pandemic, unemployment rates for women were consistently higher than for men. 1.8 million women left the workforce during the pandemic. In the month of September 2020, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 863,000 women dropped out of the workforce compared to 168,000 men. That equates to 27,838 women leaving the workforce every day!

Clearly the pandemic hit women harder than men. Why? Childcare, school closings, caring for elderly parents — so often these roles fall on the lower wage earner in the family. Despite so many gains in the workforce, women still earn less than their male counterparts.

The dairy industry is trying to address the gaps in pay and create more flexibility with schedules to help workers balance the demands of home and work, and I think many organizations have made good progress.

Please tell me about your involvement in various industry groups and associations. What advantages does membership in these organizations bring to your role in the industry?

I have played a role in industry groups that touch many aspects of the dairy industry. In my role as board member for the U.S. Dairy Export Council and the Madison International Trade Association, I gained knowledge and connections to help dairy processors grow global sales. By being involved in the trade groups, I became a better adviser to dairy processors on how to grow their international sales and overcome international trade obstacles. It also allowed me to advocate on behalf of our

dairy industry exporters.

My connection with state organizations including Wisconsin Agribusiness Association, Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association and Wisconsin Dairy Products Association help me keep my finger on the pulse of industry issues from production and processing to governmental.

I would encourage every person in the dairy industry to find a trade association to support. Be willing to volunteer for committees, attend events and network with the association leadership.

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

My style has developed and matured over the years and hopefully will continue to develop and improve. I firmly believe that as a leader we should never stop learning. My main leadership style, if I had to choose one, would be that of servant leader. It's not about "me" but "we." I enjoy the opportunity to work as a team, draw on each individual's strengths and see the team achieve greatness, celebrate our success and work together to improve.

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

Prepare, know the facts, examine the situation from multiple angles, seek input from others and above all else — make your argument, request or proposal about the good of the organization, not about what is good for you as an individual.

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

One common theme with many of the dairy processors I work with is a challenge to fully connect with their non-English-speaking workforce. The challenges go beyond language barriers and include cultural barriers. I happen to have a personal connection to this topic. My grandparents were immigrants from Mexico and my husband is Venezuelan. Helping employees with Limited English Proficiency is a personal and professional passion of mine. Through my role I've helped dairy

processors understand how to connect with their culturally diverse workforce, guided processors on developing RFPs to select translation vendors and access grants to cover training costs for their workforce. Our workforce, just like our national demographics, will continue to diversify. It is my humble opinion that the dairy industry will succeed, in part, by learning how to fully integrate workers with limited English proficiency into their teams.

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

To be effective, you must first know how to lead yourself. Know what motivates you to achieve, know what drains your energy and recharges your batteries. You have to first show up for yourself before you can show up for your team.

Get out of your head, be kind to yourself and learn how to be your best advocate. This will give you confidence and the proverbial "inner peace" you need to handle challenging situations, tough conversations and the inevitable "downs" that can enter all of our work lives. Practicing self-awareness as well as mindfulness enables leaders to be better listeners, communicators and decision-makers.

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

To motivate the next generation we need to inspire passion for the industry in young women from not only farms but also cities, suburbs and small towns — urban and rural.

I grew up on a dairy farm and loved every aspect of dairy farming. My upbringing, close to the cows and our dairy cooperative, inspired me to continue to serve the dairy industry. Statistics show that only 1% of the U.S. population today works on farms — even less on dairy farms. The need to do outreach outside the industry is critical.

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

In my early 40s, I made a dramatic career shift. It was a shift that nobody

saw coming — least of all myself — but one I had to make for my family. While leading an international trade mission, my middle son suffered a health issue and was admitted to the children's hospital. Because I was in Guadalajara, Mexico, I wasn't able to fly home until the next day. I loved my work at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) helping food and agribusinesses grow their global business. But I had to pivot — my passport had to go on the shelf.

I had never considered moving into the world of insurance. I had no idea what an insurance broker was or the type of work they did. What I knew was that I wanted to work with dairy processors and agribusinesses.

A good friend introduced me to leadership at M3, and the first proverbial cup of coffee led to a second and a third. And M3 saw value in someone who was an expert in their field and who could learn insurance.

M3 rolled the dice on me and I rolled the dice on M3, and my career in the insurance and risk management world was born.

I bring to my firm a deep understanding of the complexities of the food and agribusiness sectors. And with dairy specifically, a knowledge of the challenges facing the dairy industry from workforce to supply and demand challenges. I have been told that my insider perspective and understanding of the dairy industry is unique in the insurance brokerage world. By combining my insight with the expert risk management experience my team members offer, together we help dairy processors not just survive, but thrive.

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?

The first inspirational leaders were my parents who taught me the values of hard work, caring for your animals and your family, overcoming obstacles and finding joy in not just a job, but a vocation. Without hesitation, I say that I owe my professional success to the influence of countless mentors in the dairy industry, at DATCP as well as my coworkers at M3 who embraced and welcomed a self-proclaimed dairy nerd to the insurance world. I have two words for all my wonderful mentors — THANK YOU. CMN