



# WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Driving innovation and growth in cheese and dairy



## Brenda Dehart

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**Q Do you feel women in the industry are well represented in trade organizations, educational content and the media? Where are there gaps?**

**A** Across the industry, women remain underrepresented in many influential spaces, including boardrooms, trade organizations and media. While progress is happening, the pace is slow and inconsistent. Representation matters. When women don't see people who look like them in leadership, many never consider those roles as possibilities.

Through my work on the board of Female Strong, an organization dedicated to helping girls "See what they can be," I've seen firsthand how visibility and confidence are intertwined. The next challenge is ensuring current female leaders actively create space for more women at the table. That means mentoring, advocating for others and normalizing women's leadership as part of the industry's culture rather than an exception.

**Q Thinking of leaders you've worked with, what strategies have you adopted, and what have you avoided?**

**A** Some of the most valuable lessons come from witnessing what not to do. Early in my career I promised myself I would never micromanage. People do their best work when they're trusted, given room to think and encouraged to approach challenges in their own way.

I've also learned from excellent leaders who believed in people before their résumés were perfect. Many of the most impressive contributors are those who were given opportunities based on potential rather than credentials. When leaders step back from rigid frameworks and let people jump in, they often find the biggest and most rewarding surprises.

Early on, the word "strategy" felt intimidating. A CEO once simplified it for me: Strategy is knowing your long-term goals — and what you're not going to do. That clarity changed everything.

Leaders can't have 17 priorities. Narrowing focus to what truly matters sets teams up for success and prevents the chaos of scattered goals.

Finally, I've learned that empathy is not a weakness. Empathetic leaders can still be extremely driven and high-performing. Empathy supports clear communication, helps address conflict early and strengthens trust.

**Q How is technology — automation, AI, data-driven decisions — shaping leadership in the dairy industry? What skills will matter most over the next decade?**

**A** At Foremost Farms, we're deep into a data and analytics journey. Dairy farming has always been data-driven — from genetics to feed rations to daily milk output — but the scale and sophistication of available data continue to grow. The opportunity for leaders today is to use that data to make faster, smarter decisions that ultimately strengthen support for our farmers.

Predictive models allow leaders to anticipate patterns rather than react to them. AI isn't about replacing people; it's about shifting our energy away from manual data crunching and toward higher-level thinking. Historically we've spent 80% of our time working through data and 20% analyzing it — and that ratio must flip.

The leaders of the future will value problem-solvers: people who can interpret complex information, think systemically and build connections between data and outcomes. AI will eliminate repetitive tasks, but human judgment, communication and strategic clarity will matter more than ever.

**Q What are your non-negotiables, and how do you approach conflict?**

**A** One of my core principles comes from a leadership off-site: Always assume positive intent. Entering conversations from a place of curiosity rather than accusation opens doors, lowers defensiveness and leads to more productive solutions. Instead of saying, "You did this," start with what you observed and ask questions.

Address issues immediately — not months later during a review. Letting problems linger only magnifies them. Difficult conversations are rarely comfortable, but when grounded in honesty, good intent and a focus on improvement, they can become turning points. As Brené Brown says, "Clear is kind." Even when clarity is hard, kindness lies in transparency.

**Q What advice would you give young women hesitant to pursue leadership roles in male-dominated industries?**

**A** So much of leadership begins with believing in yourself. Through my work with Female Strong, I've seen how powerful that self-belief can be. When your motivation is rooted in good intentions, trust it.

Don't let traditional expectations define your path. I'm a mom of three and a grandmother of two, and I always tell young women they do not have to choose between family and career. Success comes from surrounding yourself with people — partners, friends, colleagues — who support you. The balance will shift over time, and that's normal. Don't carry guilt for being human.

You are responsible for your own growth. Don't wait for someone to give you permission to take the next step. When I've chosen to leave organizations, it wasn't because things were bad — I was performing well. But when the next step wasn't clear, I knew it was time to move toward roles that helped me grow.

Take ownership of your life, your development and your trajectory. Pursue opportunities that challenge you and bring out your best.

**Q How do you balance authenticity with professionalism?**

**A** Professionalism and authenticity can coexist. At work, business comes first, but your personality shouldn't disappear. Some situations call for focus and firmness; others benefit from levity and personal connection. Consistency across these moments — being the same grounded person whether things are stressful or celebratory — builds credibility.

Sharing parts of your life helps people understand you. My team knows I love to travel and read, and that food is a passion that aligns naturally with my work in the industry. When leaders bring their whole selves, they foster trust and connection that strengthen teams.

**Q How do you lead during disruptions such as supply chain changes, policy shifts or evolving consumer expectations?**

**A** Disruption is part of the reality in dairy. Leaders must be transparent and communicative when challenges hit. That means clearly explaining what's happening, what the team needs to pause and how priorities should shift to get through the moment. People perform better when they understand the "why" behind decisions.

Leadership in difficult times requires a balance of honesty and optimism. Teams need clarity on the situation but also reassurance that there's a path forward. Grounding people in the reality while helping them stay hopeful is a vital leadership responsibility.

**Q What industry insight would you share with yourself 10 years ago?**

**A** The dairy industry is cyclical — challenges you think are behind you often return. Expect the unexpected and stay adaptable.

A decade ago, few would have predicted the level of innovation and investment happening in dairy today. It's a reminder that the industry evolves continuously, and leaders must evolve with it.

And personally, what would I tell myself 10 years ago?

I'd tell myself to keep believing in who I am and focus on making a meaningful impact. I never planned my career around a specific title — including becoming a CEO. Instead, I focused on delivering value, showing up with integrity and striving to be someone whose contributions were undeniable.

If you stay committed to growth, bring your best to the work in front of you and maintain clarity on your purpose, you'll end up exactly where you're meant to be. **CMN**