



Women in Leadership



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

Kate Neumeier Clarke is president and CEO of Wisconsin Aging & Grading Cheese Inc., Kaukauna, Wisconsin

Please comment on working in a family-owned business and becoming the first female leader of the company.

All families, in general, have different dynamics, whether working together in a family business or just helping support each other on a day-to-day basis. Every family has outstanding qualities and areas to improve upon, especially as individuals' roles change. An individual might start off supporting the family (a child) and then find themselves leading it (taking over for a parent/s). Ours is no exception. With my father starting our company and me supporting him, it was a natural dynamic — father/daughter. However, when my older sister worked with our company, it was a different dynamic, as I was leading her. A shift in family roles — younger sister/older sister. However, we both know each other's strengths and therefore just supported each other in them versus having a power struggle. Now that my father has retired, I am leading the company he started, and he is supporting me. Again, knowing what each other can contribute to making the company thrive. We've had a natural business dynamic relationship within our family. Not to say that it's always been easy (we can be very passionate individuals), but the transition was very natural for me to take over at the helm. I've never seen it as a specific gender leading our company. Our company is who we are, and that's not going to change just because a female is leading it now. Yes, I do bring different goals/ideas, but I do not see that as something that any other gender wouldn't have brought. It's just another individual's perspective and goals.

Is there a time you felt blatantly discriminated against in your career because of your gender, and if so, how did you address it?

In general, I felt very included and welcomed from the beginning. I do

attribute that to my father and grandfather — both men that had/have quality reputations and contributions that I would hopefully carry on. However, there have been a few times that I have been passed by in discussions that should have happened directly with myself, conference calls that I should have been included in or dinners that would have been beneficial for me to attend. Perhaps it was that some genders just feel more comfortable working with the same gender or perhaps it was that I was discarded as not knowing as much on a subject, or perhaps it was just circumstantial. Nonetheless, if I felt that I was being disregarded on purpose or not I would make it a point to be debriefed on the discussions that took place. This way I would stay in tune and stay up to speed. Many times, this would catch people off guard and let them know I was perhaps more integral and involved than they previously realized.

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?

First and foremost, it would be my father, Ken Neumeier. His dedication to never settle for the status quo, pursuing his dream without falling to other criticisms and always making sure to take care of the people you've been bestowed leadership on. Another individual would be Sandy Toney (of Masters Gallery Foods). I've known Sandy for over 20 years. She is absolutely a force to be reckoned with and does not back down when she knows when something is correct. Sandy has never cut corners to get ahead. She is who she is and makes sure people know it. It's a very contagious personality to be around. Also, Sandy is a very upstanding individual who is very knowledgeable within the cheese industry and proves it time and time again. She selflessly takes others under her wing to help them — male or female. Plus, she always does it with a great smile/laugh. Sandy, whether she intended to or not, has forged the way for other women to lead in areas that women had never been before — i.e., the first "Red Hat" in the Wisconsin Cheese Markers Association cheese contest and giving women clout in the cheese grading arena.

Do you believe the cheese/dairy industry as a whole is supportive of women?

Yes, it's come a long way since I started back in 2001. Having columns such as this has given women an opportunity to share their backgrounds, let others know how they've achieved the positions they have and help to educate other genders on the different perspectives that women can bring to the table.

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

Being approachable, honest, supportive and willing to help others to achieve their goals and responsibilities. If you're able to let your team know and feel that you're fully invested in their best interests, it pays dividends time and time again. However, you can't just act a certain way and go through the motions; you need to put in the work and be there.

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

Female or male, a successful leader needs to lead with respect and therefore will gain respect. You need to "show up" for your team daily. Ask questions, find out what their needs are (not their wants) and do your best to meet them. They need to know that you always have their back and will create an environment for them to thrive. You need to listen more than talk, ask questions, find out about them as a person and not just as an employee.

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

Trust in your instincts and speak up. If you get that feeling that something is off in your stomach, and you feel that you can see an issue potentially going to happen, speak up and don't back down. It's the classic "see something, say something." If you really feel strongly about something, don't settle, and continue to work towards it. Find a different approach or communicate

it differently and always know your worth. Speak up.

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

Many women are naturally good at multitasking and can bring that to their careers. Some of it can also be attributed to balancing a family, their career and themselves. Managing a family schedule can be like balancing a toothpick on top of a unicycle. Very similar to balancing meetings, conventions, email communications, team building experiences, deadlines, etc. It's a lot to juggle, but it seems as though many women have this natural ability to do so. Being a mother of two young children and a CEO, I can relate.

However, it's not all roses; many women push themselves to "do it all." Have a family, succeed in their careers and do it with a manicure. That can be a lot and therefore push women to their limits. That is where taking care of yourself so that you can take care of others becomes essential. It can put a lot of stress on mental health if you don't take care of yourself. The airplane analogy that you must put on your mask first or you won't be able to help others. Whether that means taking care of your employees or your children, people must make time for themselves and decompress. I have worked with many individuals (men and women) over my career who personally struggle, and/or their children struggle, with anxiety and/or depression. This therefore carries over into the workplace. Mental health is a very personal perspective that I bring to my position. Struggling with mental health can be debilitating and I have seen that with help, the struggle can be managed, and people can thrive again. It's not a dead end. The stigma of working on your mental health truly needs to be lifted and more support needs to be given. When one person can be brave enough to say, "I know, I get it. I've been there, too," that empathy and support transcends. You never know what someone might be fighting, and letting people know you "get it" and understand just allows for people to really be the best they can be. This all goes back to getting people what they need, not only what they want. CMN