



# Women in Leadership



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

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is president and CEO of  
*Associated Milk Producers  
Inc., New Ulm, Minnesota.*

**In an industry with continuous innovation, what inspires you to think creatively and foster creativity among your employees?**

We foster collaboration with customers and team members. Together, they offer inspiration and creative ideas that ultimately lead to innovative flavors and formats.

Within the cheese category, flavor profiles are changing. Consumers are craving sharper and bolder flavors. Associated Milk Producers Inc. (AMPI) offers solutions for these changing tastes with a variety of specialty cheeses. Adding additional flavors to our Cheddar and Monterey Jack cheeses has been especially popular.

**What is something you learned during your time as executive vice president and co-president of AMPI that will help guide the future of the cooperative in your role as sole CEO?**

Continue asking questions until you fully understand. When AMPI Co-President and CEO Donn DeVelder and I began this role eight years ago we asked our employee team and member leaders three questions:

- What should we continue doing? In other words, what do we do well and what do our customers want?
- What should we stop doing?
- What trophy do we want on our mantle?

We focused on the answer: We make really good cheese.

To capitalize on our cheesemaking strengths and increasing demand, the AMPI board of directors approved a plan to implement “smart growth.” We define that as beginning with customer demand, having confidence in the milk supply from member farms and, lastly, expanding manufacturing capacity.

What followed was the largest investment in manufacturing capacity since the co-op was formed in 1969. The co-op’s four major cheese plants in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa are now equipped with state-of-the-art

cheesemaking equipment.

During that time, we continued to tally up wins at national and global cheese contests, further building AMPI’s reputation as a provider of award-winning American-type cheeses: Cheddar, Colby, Monterey Jack, Colby Jack, Pepper Jack and, of course, our prized pasteurized process American cheese slices.

We are now the largest farmer-owned cheese company in the U.S.

Looking ahead, we will continue to ask questions — of our team, dairy farmer-owners and customers — to determine the best next steps for the business.

**“We are seizing the opportunity to tell our farmer-owned, co-op crafted story. Consumers want and deserve to know more about the food they are choosing for themselves and their families.”**

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ASSOCIATED MILK  
PRODUCERS INC.

**Is there a particular product or service you were involved with launching at AMPI or throughout your career that you’re particularly proud of?**

We are seizing the opportunity to tell our farmer-owned, co-op crafted story. Consumers want and deserve to know more about the food they are choosing for themselves and their families. At AMPI, we can pinpoint the dairy farmers who produce the milk, the cheesemaker who makes the cheese and the rural communities they call home.

We introduced the Co-op Crafted promise and accompanying trademark in 2019 to tell our story. It represents:

- Upper Midwest dairy farm families coming together as member-owners of a cooperative, caring for their land and animals, and producing nutritious, wholesome milk to feed a hungry world.

- An unrivaled depth of knowledge and dedication by artisans who carefully craft cheese, butter and powdered products from milk produced on member-owners’ farms.

Our Co-op Crafted promise is annually shared through AMPI’s stewardship report that highlights our commitment to care for animals, the land and our communities.

Alongside the Co-op Crafted promise we launched a new brand — Dinner Bell Creamery. We are expanding sales of our branded butter and sliced American cheese in grocery stores throughout the Upper Midwest. In addition, award-winning Dinner Bell Creamery cheese produced at AMPI’s Portage, Wisconsin, plant can now be found on cheeseburgers in China and in the Middle East/North Africa region.

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

It’s a democratic style — a flat-line approach — that emphasizes participation and collaboration. Capitalizing on individual talents and strengths is a winning formula.

That’s coupled with open-book management. Through that approach we share information needed for employees and farmers to know how their individual contributions fit into the business as a whole.

**Please share a time when you felt your insights presented a unique solution to a challenge at your company or in an industry organization.**

I operate with a personal mantra: It’s all dairy farmer dollars.

Each move the AMPI team makes impacts dairy farmers’ livelihoods. We expect them to be the best at what they do, and they expect us to be the best at what we do. We have been given the responsibility to manage their manufacturing assets and sell the resulting products.

We recognize that everything in this industry is generated by the land, the water, the cows, the farmer. We play an important role in the process, but without the dairy farmer, we wouldn’t be here.

This mantra only grows stronger with each year I work for the dairy farmer-owners of AMPI. Perhaps, as

a fifth-generation farmer, it’s embedded in my being.

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

Being a communicator is undoubtedly the quality I deem most important. To quote Simon Sinek, “Leadership requires two things: a vision of the world that does not yet exist, and the ability to communicate it.”

Second to communication is focus. It’s seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, ignoring the noise and putting energy into what is important. It’s not where you are, but where you want to be.

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

The generation entering today’s workforce is motivated to pursue a career that aligns with their personal beliefs and values. Working in the dairy industry is an incredibly noble profession and a source of daily inspiration. After all, you’re feeding people, and food is essential to life.

**How have you seen a change and/or increase in women participating and becoming leaders in the dairy industry over the past 5-10 years?**

Today’s female leaders are climbing ladders built by men and women, including:

- Our mothers who made their mark in agriculture but didn’t hold fancy titles.
- Fathers who never questioned our ambitions.
- Business colleagues who judged us by our abilities.

We must give a nod, show respect to those who came before us. I’m standing on their shoulders. I hope others will stand on mine.

As I reflect on my career, I’ve been part of a period of transition: from a time when women leaders were considered a novelty to one where it’s becoming more commonplace.

I’m confident today’s college students will be part of the next phase. They’ll be asked about their leadership style rather than being a female leader. CMN