



Women in Leadership



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

Laurie Fischer is CEO of the American Dairy Coalition.

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

A collaborative leadership style gets a positive response in my role as CEO of American Dairy Coalition. There are so many areas for a grassroots producer organization to keep a finger on the pulse of change. I have always believed it is important to set a vision and keep moving forward with that focus in mind to get goals accomplished—not just talking about them, but mobilizing a team to achieve them.

With so much to do and only so much time, I like to pick the highest priorities based off that vision. I look for how we can have success in one item that leads to success in others. We can get confused on where to focus our energy and resources if we don't prioritize, to keep an order to what's in front of us each day or month, to be able to take those items and take that time and build that team to also be focused and moving ahead.

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

Throughout my career, when working with others on a project, I have dedicated myself to making sure all voices are heard. In a grassroots organization, this is accomplished by fostering a culture of communication and active listening through phone conferences, webinars, surveys and other opportunities for interaction, where different points of view come forward, and where we can find those items in common to work on together.

In a management team setting, it means developing trust and respect while touching base to keep us on the "same page" in our work.

Women have always had key roles in dairy, as doers. Today women are redefining and advancing those roles and sharing their knowledge and experience. According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, 36% of agricultural producers are women, and 58% of all U.S. farms had at least one female decision-maker, spanning all aspects of the business from financial and

marketing to land, crops, livestock and day-to-day management.

Milk production has always taken a whole team or family structure with every member having their areas of responsibility and expertise. Women have long been the ones to take care of critical elements of the dairy farm: the calves, which are the herd's future; the finances, which are the farm's future; and the communications, which are the industry's future.

As women have the confidence to share their ideas and solutions, they are sometimes listened to differently. We can be more animated and detail-aware and -oriented. On the corporate side, men tend to want to get right to the bottom line, and women can be more contextual, wanting to explain or explore something in more detail. It has been my experience that these subtle differences unite to strengthen the performance of a team.

Again, I come back to the point that it takes a whole team to set, refine and accomplish goals. That being the case, I try to make sure team members understand and appreciate the vision of the organization, so they can make the most meaningful contributions.

Do you see more acceptance of, and positions filled by women leaders in the dairy industry now than when you first started? If so, to what do you attribute this?

Yes, I do see both increasing, and I attribute this to two things: 1) There are so many more opportunities today for careers in dairy and related to dairy, and 2) more women are choosing careers in dairy, including new and non-traditional careers.

As dairy farms have grown and as next generations make decisions about coming back to the farm, they want time for their families, which opens up the management and employment of more people. We also see dairy farms and processing businesses diversifying to find opportunities for adjacent revenue streams. Women are historically the financial record keepers on the farm, and today, they are more openly involved in the decisions that are made as part of a management team. In diversified operations, they may be spearheading a new venture, developing new products or marketing ideas.

Women have historically tended to do much of the milking and calf

care on dairy farms and take pride in the care, cleanliness and attention to detail. On many dairies, we see women taking on the human resources role to transfer that knowledge and experience to an integral workforce, making all of the major decisions in that domain. While those outside of the dairy industry may view the jobs of milking the cows and doing the calf care as basic or entry-level labor, those of us inside the industry respect the importance of these skills that are critical to the future of our industry.

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?

Women are transforming past barriers as more of a "proving ground" for advancement. In years past, we may have looked at being "one of the girls" or "one of the guys" in a workplace or even as part of a management team. This has changed. Women break molds when we pair our confidence and motivation with our knowledge and experience to demonstrate: "Let me show you what I can do!"

Women have always had the confidence in their jobs on and off the farm, but we had to strategize how to implement what we were trying to achieve.

When in a corporate setting with layers and bureaucracy, it means women have to really believe in their ideas and not give up. Actually, this is true for anyone in a workplace, regardless of gender, to play those chess games that advance our ideas. When we get shot down, we cannot take it personally, just keep going at it on the merits.

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

I might tell my younger self to think about herself a little more. As a woman, and in collaborating with other women, I find we can be so passionate about what we are doing—because we care so much about this industry—that we don't think about our own advancement.

In short, I see many points in my career where my personal, passionate investment has been focused on getting things done for the good, instead of being focused on personal advancement. On the other hand, this is what makes grassroots organizations successful.

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

I was consulting for a group some years back, and there was a piece of legislation that was highly controversial. Many of the groups working on this legislation decided that they would support it. I found a word that made the entire piece of legislation have unintended meaning and consequence.

Our group had come out in support of this legislation, but based on the use of the word "and" or "or," we had to change our position and then mount a communications effort to make others aware of how one word changed the meaning. It took attention to detail, a lot of confidence and grit, and many conversations with attorneys and board members, but we did change our group's position, and others followed, which led to success.

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

It is critical for young people in high school and college to see and experience the broad range of opportunities in dairy from working with land, crops, animals and human resources, to marketing, processing, communications and beyond. It is also important that they see the "why."

There are so many dairy career paths and adjacent industries for young people to explore, but equally important is for them to gain experience or connection in order to develop an appreciation for the dairy industry. This is something that cannot be taught.

Today, we see more women attracted to large animal veterinary and food animal production from both the animal side and the food side. We also see a growing interest in marketing and communications, especially as women still tend to make most of the food purchasing decisions among consumers. CMN