



Women in Leadership



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

Veronique Lagrange is director of the California Dairy Innovation Center, a collaborative organization created by the California Milk Advisory Board.

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

There is a great variety in leadership styles and they can all be effective depending on the context, the company's ultimate goals and the organizational culture. At the California Dairy Innovation Center, where we focus on innovation, it is useful to have a clear vision, communicating it effectively, and do so with dynamism and passion. At the same time, clear guideposts are helpful for teams to implement programs with impact — in which case it is helpful to set explicit goals, measure progress and provide feedback, creating an accountable work environment.

In my career, I have found leaders who adopt flexible, people-centric leadership styles to be effective. For me, the best leaders are likely to be very open minded and excellent listeners.

Do you feel women in the industry are well-represented in trade organizations, educational content and the media? Where do you see gaps?

Over the past 10-15 years, a large number of remarkable women have risen to leadership positions in regional, national and even international dairy organizations. On the academic side, if I look at our California university-based dairy/food science programs for example, I would estimate the vast majority are led by women of diverse cultural backgrounds. These women are key role models for the next generation, and I am confident the gaps which still remain in parts of the industry will soon be filled with the talent they inspire on a daily basis.

Who are some dairy industry leaders that inspire you? Have you had any mentors in the industry, and how have they helped you along your career journey?

I have had many inspiring mentors in the industry, including the presidents/CEOs of organizations I've worked with over the years such as Tom Payne (TJPM), Tom Suber (USDEC), Dave Thomas (ADPI) and now John Talbot (CMAB). They articulate(d) strong visions for their respective organizations and focus on serving their stakeholders with a very high level of integrity and open-mindedness. They trust and respect their staff and seek many viewpoints.

I am tremendously grateful to have had many such mentors. I should also include leaders of dairy companies, consultants, colleagues in academia, other Dairy Centers directors and Dairy Management Inc. staff, to name a few. They have helped by providing advice, connections, by sharing their knowledge, expertise, problem-solving skills and words of wisdom! There is no question a strong network of mentors — men and women — is critical for one's career journey.

Do you feel women in the dairy industry have equal opportunities for advancement relative to their male counterparts?

Yes, as a result of very positive, deliberate changes in industry, opportunities are there. Can we seize them all? No, and the dairy sector is probably not unique in this respect. Many agricultural sectors offer leadership career paths which present challenges for women — long hours, night shifts, extensive travel, frequent relocation, difficult physical work. These demands are fair and inherent to some positions; however, at times it is difficult for us to rise to the challenge as many of us are primary caregivers or have less flexibility for relocation, variable schedules, etc. I wish I had an easy solution to offer, but I am very confident the next generation of women will identify and create alternative paths to leadership and personal success.

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?

As noted earlier and also in your recent interview of National Milk Producers Federation's Shawna Morris, the progress accomplished over the past few decades is truly spectacular. Women leaders are in place in many institutions and dairy companies in the U.S. They are highly respected and have a proven track record of success. These women have often had to work twice as hard, and twice as long, as their male counterparts.

In addition to individual efforts and talent, which should be recognized, it does take time to change collective perceptions and show results. These women have remained very focused and dedicated to their mission over the years. Strength and respect, passion, honesty, networking and resilience appear to me as factors of success.

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?

In some companies, you had to start working the night shift, move from plant to plant for years, or be an engineer, have an MBA — you name it. I think dairy companies are increasingly respectful of work/life balance and offer alternative paths or training opportunities for advancement. Successful organizations understand the diversification of leadership not only reflects a commitment to equality but also enriches the industry with a broader range of expertise. This change of corporate mindset and our own networking efforts have helped overcome past barriers.

What can companies and organizations in the dairy industry do to further diversity, equity and inclusion in their hiring and career advancement practices?

The inclusion of women in leadership positions fosters a more collaborative and dynamic work environment. As decision-makers, women contribute to strategic planning that takes into account a diverse set of perspectives, ultimately enhancing

the industry's ability to address complex issues and capitalize on emerging trends. In addition to their leadership roles, women in the dairy industry are increasingly involved in research and development, driving innovation and sustainability initiatives. Their contributions extend to areas like process innovation, sustainable packaging design and the development of new products for our changing consumer base.

As mentioned earlier, companies need to be mindful of work/life balance challenges and develop alternative paths to growth, including leadership or skill-specific training programs.

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

Today, as I work with many companies, colleges and universities in California, I meet dozens of employees and students, and what I hear is that young women are not aware of the variety of jobs our industry offers, the size of our industry (dairy is the No. 1 ag sector here in California!), as well as the diversity of our employees and their backgrounds. I feel it is important to position the dairy sector as a large, dynamic and welcoming industry that needs a diversity of talents and skills. Students are always interested in hearing concrete examples of how we contribute to feeding the world, improving health, and sustaining and enhancing rural communities. So many careers are open, everything from regenerative agriculture to food law. We offer government, corporate and even entrepreneurship opportunities. There are a tremendous variety of careers, unlike many other sectors.

Women leaders in the dairy sector often demonstrate strong qualities such as resilience, adaptability and effective communication. These attributes are crucial in navigating the challenges and opportunities that the dairy industry faces, from technological advancements to evolving consumer preferences — communicating this diversity and the needs of our industry, with passion and honesty, is key to attracting talent. I encourage leaders to take advantage of any possible opportunity to teach a class, attend a job or internship fair, share your story at a club meeting — you will make a difference and help someone. CMN