



# Women in Leadership



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

**Mary Ledman is a dairy global strategist for Rabobank's RaboResearch Food & Agribusiness division.**

**Is there a particular risk management or other product or service you were involved with launching during your career that you're particularly proud of?**

In the late 1990s, I had a client that made cheesecakes that wanted to reduce the price volatility in its raw material cream cheese prices. The company purchased very little physical butter, but butterfat accounted for over one-third of its cream cheese price. I asked some butter manufacturers whether they would be interested in a financial swap. That is selling butter at a fixed price for a year with no delivery. Fortunately, one of the butter companies said yes, which worked well for several years. Over time, the liquidity in the CME (Chicago Mercantile Exchange) butter futures improved, making the financial swap less necessary.

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

To my knowledge, I've never been blatantly discriminated against. However, I was underestimated because I was young and a woman. Early in my career, when I worked in milk procurement for a cheese company, I gave notice verbally and in writing to the CEO of a milk supplier that we wanted to renegotiate the terms of a milk supply agreement. He replied, "Next time, bring someone with negotiating authority." I smiled and

left the office. Shortly after, I made a few phone calls, as plenty of surplus weekend milk was available, displacing some non-contractual milk from this company into our plants on weekends. It didn't take long before I received a call from the CEO apologizing for not taking me seriously.

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

I am incredibly grateful for the experience and support I have received throughout my career from the men and women of the dairy industry. And the growing number of women in the industry reflects that the industry is providing career opportunities for women.

Years ago, I organized dinners for the women attending dairy conferences. While we had a great time, it's nice to know that's not necessary anymore. In addition, industrywide programs for Women in Agriculture and Women in Dairy also provide excellent networking opportunities for women.

There were several occasions when I heard phrases suggesting that I got my position because I was a woman, which was frustrating. As a result, one of the benefits of having my consulting firm from 1995 to 2017 is that I knew that no one hired me because I was a woman. They hired me because I was a solution provider.

As for industry mentors, I've had several, including some of the women

I will name later as industry leaders such as Deborah Van Dyk, head of regulatory for Schreiber Foods. Deborah and I bonded not just because of work in the dairy sector but over family life. Her children were the same age as my step-children. There were days when I asked her whether I was facing a "step-mom" challenge or a teenager going through a phase. And more often than not, we found ourselves commiserating over the growing pains of adolescents.

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

In my early 20s, I was a state FFA (Future Farmers of America) officer in Wisconsin. During that year, I had the opportunity to participate in a Dale Carnegie leadership training program. In September 2022, I attended a dairy conference in India, and while in the Delhi airport, I saw that "How to Win Friends & Influence People" was still a best seller. While it's been many years since I read the book, I remember the emphasis on learning people's names and being interested in others. I try to associate a person's name with something I know about the person. This strategy was helpful, especially when I joined Rabobank and met many new people.

What's my coaching style? If I'm honest, it has probably ranged from helicopter mom to coach. I'd like to think it's the latter, but I know that there have been times that I've exerted too much control, and those weren't particularly successful endeavors, either. Longevity has its advantages. I've experienced some amazing highs and some terrible lows in my personal life. As a result, my ability to empathize with friends, co-workers and colleagues has grown and it is key to my positive personal and professional relationships.

**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?**

I chuckle when people say there are not many women in the dairy industry. When I started in the early 1990s, you could count on two hands the number of women active in leadership roles who attended and participated in industry conferences.

However, that observation fails to recognize the women behind the scenes in corporate offices or cheese factory laboratories.

I hesitate to name names because I know I'll forget someone. Still, I want to acknowledge that several women have worked at the highest level within the dairy industry and trade associations, including but not limited to: Delores Gossner Wheeler, president and CEO of Gossner Foods; Betsy Holden, co-CEO of Kraft Foods; Connie Tipton, CEO, International Dairy Foods Association; Sheryl Meshke, CEO, Associated Milk Producers Inc.; Miriam Erickson Brown, CEO, Anderson Erickson Dairy; Patty Stroup, chief procurement officer, Nestlé; Sue Taylor, Leprino Foods; Deborah Van Dyk, Schreiber Foods; Audrey Throne, Hershey; and Susan Quame, publisher, *Cheese Market News*.

Still, more women are involved in the industry today than 20 and 30 years ago. That is also related to the increase in women receiving college degrees.

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**What are some unique perspectives that you and/or other women in the industry have brought to their positions (particularly with market forecasting)?**

I wouldn't say being a woman brings any unique characteristics to market forecasting. In contrast, I think my farm-level knowledge has always been an advantage. I grew up knowing that cows didn't produce the same amount of milk, butterfat and protein every month. And it was just natural to correlate that information to seasonality in dairy product production and its impact on prices. **CMN**