



# Women in Leadership



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

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

My colleagues serve as my source of inspiration for fostering creativity among employees. When I joined Leprino, what stood out to me was the focus on innovation and continuous improvement across the organization. This mindset needed to extend to our human resources (HR) department. We had to evaluate how we were partnering with the business and develop a people strategy that would enable a high-performing and engaged organization. This shift forced us to think differently about the tools, programs and processes that we needed to provide to the business to deliver against our objectives and to create a culture that would give us a competitive advantage in attracting and retaining top talent. To achieve this, I needed a team of individuals who were driven, passionate, creative and capable of implementing strategic people initiatives that our business leaders and our employees could rally around.

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

I like to demonstrate a collaborative leadership style and strive for a win/win situation wherever possible. A colleague of mine once stated “would you rather be right or effective?” and this stuck with me. When interacting with and leading my teams, I try to be humble and authentic, as well as a good coach and communicator. I find true joy and fulfillment in helping team members develop and grow their careers. I had a boss and mentor early on in my career who pushed me out of my comfort zone, encouraged me to try new things, gave me honest feedback (even when I didn’t want it) and always had my back. I am extremely grateful for how that support helped me grow and advance my career. Now, I try to pay it forward by applying that same leadership style with my teams.

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

To ensure women’s voices are heard, it’s essential that we, as women, actively participate, be present and contribute when given the opportunity — whether in group meetings, individual settings with other leaders or with team members. Proactively seek out opportunities to increase visibility. Be confident and speak up in expressing your opinion, thoughts and questions. Another effective strategy to make sure you are heard is to be viewed as an expert in your field and a key contributor to the business. This advice was given to me early on from my current boss, with whom I have worked with for more than two decades. He has been a steadfast ally who has always supported me throughout my career — which leads to my next point. Seek out allies and mentors who can support you and your ideas and who can coach you along the way, guiding you on your journey. As a senior leader now, it’s important for me to engage and educate other leaders, especially males, to encourage and support the women in their organizations and to provide them the tools to do so.

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

Not unlike the dairy industry, the recruitment and retention of women had been a particular challenge for us here at Leprino. In response, we formulated a comprehensive diversity and inclusion strategy. This strategy encompassed various measures to bolster our capacity to hire, develop, engage and retain female talent at Leprino. This included establishing specialized learning and development opportunities tailored to women’s needs, focused on fostering their professional growth. Additionally, we initiated networking and support groups, such as Lean In, mentoring programs, career planning discussions and new mother support teams. Furthermore, a comprehensive evaluation of our total rewards and benefit offerings was conducted. This process helped to create compensation and benefits packages that were not only competitive, but also specifically tailored to attract and retain women professionals. This ongoing journey has already achieved considerable success and will continue into the future.

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

Successful leaders need to demonstrate many important qualities. What I’ve discovered is that the most impressive and effective leaders are humble, embody servant leadership, and are authentic and trustworthy. I truly believe that leaders who are personally invested in the growth, development and success of their team members will experience a more engaged and productive team. Not to mention, it is personally fulfilling when you can see how your leadership and support has a direct impact on someone’s growth and development. I recently participated in a panel discussion, and I was reminded of this Theodore Roosevelt quote: “Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care.” Often in business we try to “not sweat the small stuff.” But when it comes to leadership, we DO need to sweat the small stuff, because it’s the little things that successful leaders do every day that show people how much they care — a simple “thank you” “good morning, how was your weekend?” “great job!” or a birthday wish.

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

As an industry, it’s crucial to proactively engage with women early and often to educate them on what a career in dairy can look like. Reflecting on my own experience a decade ago when I joined Leprino, I was unaware of the wealth of possibilities offered in both the industry and within our company. The science, technology, innovation, career growth, history, complexity and sense of pride of being able to sustainably feed and nourish families around the world is truly inspirational and energizing. We need to tell our stories and share our successes with other women as examples for them. Also, as an industry we need to collectively come together and build strategies to encourage women to consider a career in dairy. We need to share and leverage company-specific best practices. We need to leverage and participate in industry groups and market the advantages of working in dairy through social media platforms. We need to attend career fairs and other network-

ing events targeted toward women to showcase the benefits of working in this industry and share success stories that would inspire women to seek a career in dairy.

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

I can’t claim to have experienced blatant discrimination, and I consider myself extremely lucky to have worked with some great teams and some fantastic male leaders who have supported and guided me throughout my career. Nevertheless, I have felt “out of place” at times, being the only woman on a leadership team. Early on, it really shook my confidence in myself, but as I continued to grow and develop, I learned that through building relationships, having strong mentors, mastering my trade, delivering results and expanding my knowledge, that I earned an equal seat at the table. Looking back, I realized the only thing that would hold me back was me.

**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?**

I can’t speak for the entire industry, but I firmly believe that transforming the leadership landscape begins within each of our respective companies and organizations. Our individual efforts and advancements will have a ripple effect and improve the industry as a whole — and the task will seem a little less daunting if we take it one step at a time. These efforts require support and leadership from the top down. When these efforts are linked to a business strategy and ownership is held at all levels of leadership, rather than an “HR Initiative,” the results will be exponentially greater. We’ve put many programs in place over the last several years at Leprino to help develop and engage women both in our plants and our corporate office. The results have shown engagement levels at parity or higher compared to men, and our senior leadership representation for women has more than doubled. We still have a lot of work ahead of us, but we need to celebrate our achievements along the way. **CMN**