



Women in Leadership



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

Tammy Graf
is community relations/
executive team administrator
for Masters Gallery Foods,
Plymouth, Wisconsin

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

Having a clear understanding of my “why,” a passion for continuous improvement and being open-minded inspires me to think creatively. My personal “why” is to help others succeed in life, which can take on different forms. For instance, in my community relations role at Masters Gallery Foods (MGF), I lead the MGF Gives Back Committee and initiatives to engage employees in community stewardship. Fostering creativity among committee members occurs by encouraging all team members to speak freely, share ideas openly, disagree, provide solutions and take ownership. Everyone has a voice at the table and is involved in the decision-making process. In my administrative role, I help our business to succeed and grow by supporting our team behind the scenes. I look for opportunities to create processes that help our team work smarter, not harder.

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

My leadership style is a mixture of participatory leadership and coaching. I instinctively use one style over the other depending on the project or initiative I am leading and the experience and knowledge of my team members. With a more experienced group, I share the responsibilities and decision-making. Everyone brings something unique to the table, and trust has already been established between members. In this case, I am more of a facilitator. This approach garners a positive response because everyone has a voice and accepts accountability. We all rise or fall together. I was privileged to lead teams that made a huge impact on our community using this approach.

I lean into a coaching style of leadership when working with young professionals who are just starting their careers. In this case I provide more direction to the group while serving as a mentor to help individual team members identify their strengths and talents.

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

All successful leaders never stop learning and growing. I am a huge fan of Brene Brown who teaches leaders across the country how to build trust through courage, vulnerability and empathy. Creating walls from perfectionism and thinking you have all the answers does not make for an effective leader. It is more than okay to ask for help, but women, especially, are often hesitant to ask for help from fear of being perceived as weak. Our society has made progress towards removing this stigma, but change takes time. I still turn to my mentors on occasion and highly recommend it. I have both male and female mentors and appreciate their unique perspectives and experiences.

Successful leaders equally serve as mentors, which is so important in today’s multigenerational workforce. Staying open minded to new ideas and perspectives allows both participants in the mentor-mentee relationship to learn and grow their knowledge and leadership skills. The dairy industry benefits greatly from the exchange between mentors with years of experience and knowledge and younger mentees who bring new technologies and business ideas. It is a win for everyone.

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

The industry as a whole has come a long way and has done a better job of representing women across the board over the past 15 years. Like anything, there is always room for improvement. The key is to get more women into the field, and that starts with educating our youth. We need to start earlier, though. High school is not soon enough.

I would also like to see more women at the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association (WCMA) Golf Outing each year. I recognize there are numerous reasons for this gap, such as not knowing how to golf or not liking it, but it would be nice to see more all-women foursomes on the course besides the Masters Gallery Foods/Wisconsin Aging and Grading team represented by Sandy Toney, Laura Laehn, Kate Neumeier Clarke and me. We always finish last, but we sure have fun. It is also a great networking opportunity.

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

Education is key. There is a big opportunity for women in the dairy industry to lead this effort and serve as role models for girls and young women in the classroom. There are also opportunities outside of the classroom to connect with middle school, high school and college students such as company tours, on-site career days, job shadows, high school co-ops, apprenticeships, college internships, mock interviews, career exploration events, job fairs, Girl Scouts, 4-H groups and more.

I have a personal passion for helping students explore their careers. Over the past 15 years, I have served in numerous leadership roles in education and career development. I was honored to participate in developing the 2018-2022 Governor’s Council on Workforce Investment Strategic Plan as a member of the Resource Alignment Committee.

I also served as a member of the Sheboygan County Youth Apprenticeship Advisory Committee and on the board of directors for Inspire Sheboygan County, an organization that connects students with local businesses for real-world experiences. For 10 years I served on the Business and Education Partnership Committee of the Sheboygan County Chamber, where I assisted in planning the chamber’s annual career exploration event and helped to connect 15,000 high school students with career professionals over this period of time. I eventually sought training at UW-Madison and obtained my Global Career Development Facilitator certification.

Masters Gallery Foods is very proactive in developing strong partnerships with our local schools, colleges and universities. We work closely with school administrators, school counselors and neighboring businesses to assist in curriculum development and actively engage with students to promote careers in the cheese industry.

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?

Sandy Toney from Masters Gallery Foods inspires me as a leader in the cheese industry and as a role model for women. She is a consummate professional with incredible knowledge and a passion for creating quality products. Anyone who has

ever worked with Sandy has experienced her kindness, humor and down-to-earth approach. She treats everyone with respect regardless of status or position. You might not expect to receive this kind of treatment from the vice president of corporate quality and product development, but Sandy’s journey to the top was not easy, and she has remained humble. She went to college while her kids were still in school and worked her way up through the ranks. Her strong work ethic, desire to help others and 30+ years of experience is why she is highly respected by her industry peers, supplier partners, customers and her team at Masters Gallery Foods. It is no wonder Sandy was selected to be Assistant Chief Judge for the WCMA and the first woman “Red Hat.”

Sandy has been a mentor to so many women in the dairy industry, including me. She has shared her knowledge and developed a team of women and men who are some of the best in the business. She is always willing to educate others about cheese and teach what she looks for in a quality product, and I have learned a great deal from her in this regard. She also taught high school and college students about careers in the cheese industry and has paved the way for other women to succeed. She understands the challenges women face throughout their career and is always willing to listen and serve as a sounding board to help us navigate through it all.

Another person that inspires me is Jeff Giffin. I supported Jeff as his executive assistant for seven years during his tenure as president and CEO of Masters Gallery Foods. He is a huge supporter and friend of the industry, receiving both the WCMA Cheese Industry Champion Award and the Wisconsin Dairy Products Association President’s Award. I especially appreciate Jeff’s perspective, candor and willingness to address any elephants in the room. It takes courage and a strong leader to say what needs to be said rather than what is popular.

Jeff was a good mentor, too. I was very green to the industry when I first started working for Masters. He is smart and a natural-born teacher. Jeff taught me about cheese from A to Z and all about the business side of things, especially the market. Jeff is big on education and was instrumental in developing a cheese school for Masters Gallery employees at the time. I also got to know so many people and other industry leaders because of my association with Jeff. His “work hard, play hard” mentality has stayed with me over the years. When work and/or life gets stressful, I am reminded of Jeff’s philosophy, and I know it is time to inject a little fun into my life. CMN