



Women in Leadership



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

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What do you think are the most important attributes of a leader, and how do you use your role to help direct, motivate and inspire your team?

I think great leadership looks different for everyone, and the most effective leaders are those who lead in a way that is authentic to who they are. True leadership is about how you show up and contribute toward a shared goal, regardless of title or position. Over the course of my career, I have focused on how I can add value by listening to and supporting my coworkers, taking initiative and asking thoughtful questions. That mindset has helped me grow and continued to open the door to new opportunities for the teams I have been a member of. At the end of the day, leadership is about showing up with intention and always being open to growth, both your own and your team's.

Thinking of leaders and/or role models you have worked with in the past, what are some strategies you have learned from them and adopted, and what are some things you have tried to avoid?

I've been privileged to have several key role models throughout my life and career. However, when it comes to leadership and hard work, my parents really have been the best role models in the example they set. They own and operate an egg farm in Upstate New York, and they're the hardest-working people I know. They work tirelessly to produce a high-quality product, provide excellent customer service and continually adapt to market changes. While I did not always appreciate it growing up, from a young age I was taught to jump in, take ownership of the task at hand and do whatever it takes to support the success of the operation.

That said, one of the lessons I've had to learn over time is the importance of balance. The same work ethic can also be a double-edged sword — especially in animal agriculture, which

never truly sleeps. Over the years, I've made a conscious effort to recognize when it's time to step back, unplug and prioritize rest. Doing so allows me to stay energized and ready to face challenges.

Can you please elaborate on the concept behind starting Integrated Dairy Ingredients and your role as CEO?

Integrated Dairy Ingredients (IDI) was created to build a stronger, more transparent link between the dairy farmers who produce our ingredients and the customers who use them. The three founding cooperatives — Agri-Mark, Maryland & Virginia Milk Producers Cooperative Association and Upstate Niagara Cooperative — saw an opportunity in working together to market their ingredients. By combining resources, they could streamline the supply chain and have more open dialogue with customers, especially around sustainability and long-term value creation. This is especially important given the new processing capacity and the shifts in supply and demand balance on the East Coast. It was the right moment to align efforts and think more strategically about the future.

When I was approached with the opportunity to lead IDI, I saw the potential to build something meaningful — a company that not only supports the success of the farms that own these cooperatives but also meets the evolving needs of our customers. That's what excited me most: the chance to help bridge the gap between farm and end user in a way that's collaborative, transparent and future-focused.

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?

I've been fortunate to work with strong women in leadership roles since the very beginning of my career. Because of that, I never saw gender as a limitation. That said, over the past 20 years, I have seen a shift with more women in leadership roles now than when I started. I used to joke that one of the perks of going to industry meetings was

the short line for the women's restroom. That dynamic has changed.

Today, there are more women in leadership across the business side of dairy, which aligns with the fact that more women are pursuing careers in business overall. As more women have stepped into these roles, they've also become mentors and examples for the next generation, helping to make the path a little clearer and more accessible for others coming up behind them.

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?

The broader conversation we need to focus on is how to attract talent to the dairy industry, regardless of gender. Dairy is an incredible industry to be part of; it is filled with hard-working, down-to-earth people. I always encourage students exploring career paths to take a serious look at dairy. The opportunities are wide-ranging: marketing, engineering, food science, finance, supply chain management or beyond, there's truly something for everyone.

At the same time, we need to acknowledge the barriers that make it harder to attract new talent. Fewer young people are growing up with exposure to agriculture. Many don't understand how food gets to their table, let alone consider it a viable or exciting career path. That means we, as an industry, need to work harder to tell our story and show the breadth of opportunities available.

I've had strangers in airports ask me what I do, only to respond with, "That's not a real job." It's always an interesting moment, but also a chance to open someone's eyes to the complexity, science and effort behind getting dairy products onto grocery store shelves and into their refrigerators. We all can help build more visibility for opportunities in dairy and help attract talent.

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

One of the biggest risks any organization can face is surrounding itself with people who all think the same way. It might feel easier, but it rarely leads to real innovation or progress. There's nothing more stagnant than a room where no one is willing to question the status quo or bring up a different perspective.

It's so important to have people at the table who bring a different point of view and are willing to share it in a constructive, collaborative way. The best teams are made up of people who can challenge each other, find common ground and keep moving forward. Not only does it make a company stronger, but it also makes it a much better place to work.

I'd rather hire or promote someone who's open to new ideas, eager to learn and can think creatively rather than someone who assumes they already have the answers. Passion, being open to try new things and the willingness to jump in and do the work are far more valuable traits than a resume that checks all the traditional boxes.

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

I'd remind myself how important it is to continue to tell the story of agriculture. As fewer people grow up with any first-hand connection to farming, food production or even gardening, the gap in understanding continues to widen each year. And that impacts everything from how we sell nutritious dairy products to how we attract the next generation of talent into this industry.

Along these lines, I don't think our industry fully appreciated the influence that social media would have 10 or 20 years ago. We underestimated how quickly misinformation could spread and how public perception could shift based on what's trending online. We also didn't immediately understand how powerful those platforms could be in promoting dairy. Just look at the revitalization and rebirth that cottage cheese is currently having thanks to food influencers and viral recipes.

I see this insight as a jumping-off point that we can apply to today. We're facing a similar moment with artificial intelligence. It's another tool that comes with both opportunities and risks. We need to be proactive, thoughtful and open to how it might shape the future of our industry for better or worse. CMN