



WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Driving innovation and growth in cheese and dairy



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

A I believe clarity and consistency matter most. Teams need direction, not perfection. I focus on making priorities clear and ensuring decisions reflect both technical realities and business goals, whether that's in product excellence, process improvements or innovation. I also make myself available for ongoing discussions and feedback, so teams can get quick answers and keep moving forward without unnecessary delays. Credibility comes from staying connected to the work. I started in the dairy industry milking cows and feeding calves, and now as Tillamook's director of cheese and product excellence, that foundation still shapes how I lead. When teams know you understand the details and challenges from milk to curd, trust builds. That trust drives ownership, and people stay motivated when they can see how their work directly impacts the product and the business.

Q Can you comment on your experience in evaluating products in international and national dairy competitions? Do you feel men and women are equally represented here?

A I've judged at the United States Championship Cheese Contest and the World Championship Cheese Contest for the past 14 years. It's been one of the most valuable parts of my career. Evaluating cheese, butter, ice cream and cultured dairy from around the world sharpens your sensory skills and exposes you to a wide range of milk types, processing methods and traditions. It reinforces just how much detail and precision goes into high-quality dairy products.

Historically, judging has been a male-dominated space, but that is changing. This year, I had the opportunity to serve as an assistant chief judge at the World Championship Cheese Contest, one of three women in that role.

Outside of competitions, I'm passionate about building that pipeline. I work closely with local FFA students in milk quality and products judging, and I mentor women in dairy, especially in sensory science and product development. Representation is improving, but continuing to invest in the next generation is what will sustain that progress.

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

A The best leaders I've worked with have created environments where people feel supported and challenged at the same time. That's something I've carried into my own leadership, building a culture where the team feels supported, can do their best work and genuinely wants to show up every day. In our R&D team, we prioritize both technical rigor and creativity. You need both to develop technically sound and tasty products. One of the things I value most is fostering a "foodie" community within the team, where curiosity, tasting and passion for food are part of how we work, not separate from it. That energy drives better thinking and stronger outcomes. What I try to avoid is overcomplicating decisions or communication. In a technical environment, it's easy to do, but it slows teams down and creates unnecessary ambiguity.

Q What role do you think leaders play in strengthening trust between the dairy industry and consumers, especially on transparency, nutrition and sustainability?

A Consumers are asking more informed questions about ingredients, sourcing, processing and environmental impact, and they expect clear answers. Dairy is complex from farm to finished product, but that shouldn't limit transparency. Leaders are responsible for demonstrating how and what we communicate and how it externally aligns with what we actually do internally. That consistency is what builds trust over time. By combining transparency, consumer education and authenticity, we strengthen confidence in dairy products and the industry as a whole.

Q How is technology (automation, AI, data-driven decisions) shaping leadership and skills in the industry?

A Technology is accelerating how we work and how we make decisions, with more real-time data and predictive tools available. In dairy, where variability is constant, the most important skill will be judgment — knowing how to interpret data, when to rely on it and when to question it. Leaders will need to balance technical capability with practical experience. Data can guide you, but it doesn't replace understanding how milk behaves, how products age or how the final product tastes.

Equally important is combining sensory and instrumental data, qualitative insights from taste, texture and aroma with quantitative measurements from analytical tools. By integrating both, we can build stronger, more consistent dairy products while driving innovation and meeting consumer expectations with confidence.

Q How do you balance authenticity with professionalism in your leadership style?

A Authenticity builds credibility, and professionalism ensures it's effective. I focus on being consistent and straightforward, while holding myself and my team accountable. I also prioritize listening, whether it's a cross-functional discussion on flavor and texture profiles or working through how to design a new cheese. Sensory and product development all bring different perspectives. By combining transparency with accountability, I create an environment where people feel heard, valued and comfortable speaking up. That ultimately leads to better products and stronger teams.

Q How do you see women contributing to the dairy industry in areas where they haven't been as visible in the past? How do you think this has changed the industry for the better?

A As more women step into leadership roles across production, technical operations and R&D, they're influencing how decisions are made across the indus-

try. I started my career in a cheese plant in sensory with just one other woman, so I've seen firsthand how representation matters. Diverse perspectives lead to more well-rounded decision making, and I've noticed increased focus on workforce development, employee engagement and collaboration as more women join the field. It's exciting to see the continued growth of women on our team and across the industry, and it encourages more young women to pursue careers in areas that were traditionally male dominated. Overall, greater representation has strengthened the dairy industry.

Q What industry insight would you share with yourself 10 years ago?

A I'd remind myself that while technical skills matter, the people around you often make the biggest difference. Build connections earlier. Strong relationships drive collaboration, provide perspective and help you navigate challenges more effectively. They also expand your impact, both personally and across the organization.

Q What lessons from outside the dairy industry have you brought into your role that made a big impact?

A One of the biggest lessons I've applied is treating each dairy product as an individual system. Dairy products are complex, living systems; small changes in milk, process or aging can significantly impact flavor, texture and consumer perception.

I've made it a priority to integrate sensory science early in R&D. It shouldn't be a final validation step, it should guide formulation, processing and decision making from the start through shelf life.

In my work developing cheese and other dairy products, I've built a clear sensory strategy with defined objectives and actionable insights, using both trained panels and consumer feedback. That allows us to make better decisions earlier and avoid late-stage adjustments.

It's also a team effort. Sensory doesn't sit in isolation — it connects R&D, quality, production and commercial teams. When those groups are aligned, the end product is more consistent and tastier for the consumer. **CMN**