



Women in Leadership



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

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

Today's dairy industry leadership includes so many inspiring women who are amazing leaders. Some lead cooperatives, others drive consumer perception efforts through promotion, while others are opening markets to U.S. products. Do I feel like there are gaps? Sure, there are gaps! But our job as leaders isn't to fill them — it's to make sure women on our teams are well positioned to be strong candidates for those roles. Our job is to create pipelines that allow their growth and development and that expose them to the information and the key leaders they need to advance.

And, let me be clear — my team, made up largely of women, did not earn their roles because of their gender. They are smart, get-it-done types who advance the strategic vision of our company and have proven to have the skills to be future leaders — that's why they are where they are. Period.

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?

We all have examples of people who have helped us understand who we want or do not want to be as leaders, as well as those who have shared strategies for advancing projects and initiatives. Clearly one must be effective at meeting goals and driving performance. However, when all is said and done, and I reflect on those (two men by the way) who have made the most impact on my thinking, I remember the famous Maya Angelou quote: "At the end of the day, people won't remember what you said or did, they will remember how

you made them feel." I am not perfect, but I want the men and women on my teams that I get to work with to feel supported, empowered, cared for and critical in advancing the company's mission — like those two men made me feel.

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Can you please comment on the Leading Impact Award you recently received from the Dairy Girl Network? What are some of the ways you feel you are leading the industry to make a positive impact, especially for women?

I am overwhelmed and honored to have received the Dairy Girl Network Leading Impact Award. The organization has grown to be an influential driver, a place to learn and a mechanism for women in agriculture to expand their network. I hope the women I work with see me as their biggest cheerleader, a valuable resource for information and someone who drives change to create more opportunity for women (and city kids) in this industry. But largely, the award reflects the support and direction I have received from my leaders, who have given me the encouragement to keep at it!

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 never saw a lack of acceptance of women in the industry; instead, I saw a lack of understanding of how to create a pipeline through policy and/or opportunity to bring women in and keep them. When I had my children in 2003 and 2006, I gave birth knowing my employer did not offer maternity leave, which was a standard offering in other industries. I had superiors who "helped me" by not offering me opportunities for after-hours engagements with customers or clients because they knew I often picked up the kids from daycare. None of that was done to hurt me — but it didn't help either. Agriculture was late in assessing the policies that shaped their pipeline. I hope that I've helped make changes in that regard.

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?

Again, the biggest challenge to women advancing in agriculture is the fact that agriculture has been late to assess the policies that shape their pipeline for recruiting and retaining talented women. However, the men and women who now lead agriculture organizations and companies are doing a better job of addressing these barriers and creating more supportive environments for all their employees.

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

Those in agriculture tend to look to others in agriculture to fill roles. I am sure that is the same in other industries, but I think what people are learning is that the "lived experience" is not the only experience that can add value to companies and organizations in agriculture. Recruiting from a broader list of colleges and universities, aligning with a range of professional organizations and ensuring job descriptions invite a larger interview pool is key.

It's true you might end up with more applicants that came from urban areas like me — but you will find that like me — non-agriculture applicants may share your values. For Dairy Farmers of America (DFA), that's community, passion, integrity and quality.

Why is it important for team members to see diversity and representation at the leadership level to inspire and motivate them to advance in their careers?

The saying "if you can see it, you can be it" is true. I want our young people to see themselves in our leadership team — but not just as it applies to gender or race — but also in approach and perspective. How leaders think, how they behave, how they interact with others, how they make people around them feel — that connects and inspires people too! I hope my impact on DFA and the industry isn't just on young women, but more broadly on aspiring young leaders.

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

I'm smart enough to know that any positive contribution I have made has been successful because it was amplified by the amazing teams I get to work with. Any idea I have had has been improved by others, and any suggestion has been amended from good to great by my colleagues. Collectively we managed through a global pandemic, declines in milk consumption, the bird flu and countless other challenges. CMN