



# Women in Leadership



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

**Allison Bolet Cafaro is generational impact manager at Great Lakes Cheese, Hiram, Ohio**

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

I think we've seen women of all ages represented more and more in the industry, but there's still room to grow — especially in attracting, onboarding and retaining women and people of color. No one wants to be the token 'only' on a team, so it's critical to create truly inclusive workplaces that value contributions, hard work and perspectives. Too often, their presence is welcomed, but their opinions, leadership and whole selves aren't fully embraced. That can leave women and people of color feeling devalued and frustrated, ultimately leading them to leave our organizations.

**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 fortunate to work with great leaders throughout my career, and many of the strategies in my own leadership style come from them. One theme they all shared is viewing leadership as a journey — an art that requires consistent effort and intention. While I have some natural leadership qualities, I've learned that being an effective people leader requires humility: seeking feedback, creating space for honest dialogue and using that input to grow. At Great Lakes Cheese, people are the heart of our business, so the stakes are high to get this right.

I've also valued leaders who led with vulnerability. They allowed me to be human, acknowledged the many hats I wear and created teams where openness and support thrived. They saw individuals for their unique strengths while still holding the team to clear expectations, which created

unmatched results.

Finally, I've learned the importance of avoiding siloed work. Building strong partnerships across functions creates momentum and buy-in — especially in newer spaces where alignment is critical. When I've found trusted partners and built true collaboration, it's felt like striking gold. I'm grateful to be in an organization that values collaboration so highly.

**Do you feel women in the dairy industry have equal opportunities for advancement relative to their male counterparts? 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?**

At Great Lakes Cheese, we focus on hiring the most qualified individual for the job, and over my 14 years here I've seen many women rise into leadership and build careers they're proud of. The industry has made progress by creating mentorship, networking and leadership development opportunities, which are critical for the future. But these resources aren't always widely known or easy to access. At the same time, workforce needs are constantly evolving, and I don't believe enough emphasis is placed on career development. This is our future, and it must remain a priority.

**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?**

These barriers aren't unique to dairy. These are barriers I have come across regularly with women across many sectors. One is financial — childcare costs, caregiving for aging parents and the realities of a double-income household often force difficult choices. The mental load also remains unbalanced, with women still carrying much of the responsibility for families

and homes. Many of us are asking: Can I have the life I want and still be the woman, partner, mom, daughter and friend I aspire to be — while also building a career?

We're grateful to the women who came before us, because their fight created opportunities that didn't exist before. But, our generation is approaching leadership differently. We don't feel we need to fight for a seat at the table — they secured that for us. Instead, we want to bring authenticity, gentleness and humility into the conversation. We are steady and confident in what we contribute, and we're committed to leading in ways that reflect both strength and balance.

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GREAT LAKES CHEESE

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

My personal opinion is that if we don't create inclusive environments, other efforts in recruiting and hiring won't matter. At Great Lakes Cheese, we work diligently to build a culture where everyone feels welcomed and included. From my eight years leading our People Impact efforts, I've learned that constant gauging and reassessing is crucial to ensuring our environment remains that way.

There are also several practical steps companies can take to strengthen diversity. Broadening where we attract talent from is essential, and as we do

that, we must also reevaluate policies to ensure we're intentional in our commitment to these individuals. Diverse candidate slates are the starting point, but best hiring practices — such as bias training for interviewers, diverse interview panels, clear feedback and fair negotiation processes — are equally important.

Finally, People Impact work cannot be a standalone effort. It should extend across onboarding, succession planning, total rewards, HRIS, supply chain and more. This integration makes the work more robust, provides visibility to the business and underscores its importance.

**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?**

Representation matters — deeply. People often believe in glass ceilings until they see someone break through ahead of them. In my career in People Impact, I've seen how essential this visibility is.

We can follow best practices in attracting, interviewing, hiring and onboarding, but diverse hires are unlikely to stay if they don't see themselves represented — especially at higher levels of the organization.

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

I would tell myself to trust the process and raise my hand more. We often expect career development to look like a straight climb up the ladder, but in reality, it's more of a squiggly line. The breadth and depth of experiences across an organization make us stronger leaders and provide invaluable insight. I wish I had raised my hand more in those early years — it's one of the best ways to work cross-functionally, build your network and better understand the business. Now I raise my hand with confidence in what I can contribute, but doing so earlier would have built that confidence sooner. **CMN**