



Women in Leadership



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

Shawna Nelson is CEO of Organic Valley, La Farge, Wisconsin

Can you please comment on what it means to you to be named the first female CEO in Organic Valley's history?

It is an incredible honor and a deeply humbling experience to step into this role, not only as Organic Valley's fourth CEO, but also as the first woman to hold this position in our cooperative's history. Two decades ago, I began my journey here as an intern, just steps away from the office I now occupy.

Being the first woman in this role is meaningful. Throughout my upbringing, my parents always told me I could accomplish anything I put my mind to. Although it was not something I consciously considered at every step along the way, it has certainly driven me throughout my career. With hard work and effort, anything is possible. I am grateful to our board and farmer-owners for recognizing my passion and commitment to leading this cooperative forward. I hope it sends a clear message, particularly to women in agriculture and cooperative leadership, that there are opportunities available at every level.

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 and organization?

To me, the most important attributes of a leader are integrity, humility, clarity and a deep sense of purpose. A good leader listens more than they speak, seeks to understand before being understood and never loses sight of the mission.

I believe in leading with transparency and trust. That means being honest about where we are, clear about where we are going and open about how we will get there together. I have had the privilege of working across many departments in the cooperative — from human resources, to marketing and sales, to membership — and that experience has taught me the value of collaboration and the strength that comes from diverse perspectives.

Motivation does not come from titles or directives. It comes from connection. I try to create space for people to

feel seen, heard and valued. Whether it is a one-on-one conversation or a company-wide update, I want our team to know that their work matters and that they are part of something bigger than themselves. That is how we build momentum, through connection to mission and purpose. Organic Valley exemplifies this with farmers and employees working in harmony with nature, providing a future for family farms and delivering high-quality organic food for consumers.

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Inspiring others starts with being inspired yourself. I am constantly moved by the dedication of our farmers, the creativity of our teams and the resilience of our community. My job is to reflect that energy back, to remove barriers and to help people see what is possible when we work together with integrity and heart.

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

Representation has improved over the years, but there is still progress to be made. In many trade organizations and industry events, women are present but often not at the front of the room. Their voices are often missing from keynote stages, policy panels and media features. This lack of visibility affects how we perceive opportunities and envision ourselves in those roles.

I see more women entering agricultural and food systems programs, and that is encouraging. There are more female-led research initiatives and growing mentorship networks. However, we need to ensure that women are not just

participating but leading. That means giving them the resources, recognition and platforms they need to thrive.

The media plays a powerful role in shaping how leadership is perceived. When women are portrayed as decision-makers, innovators and experts, it helps shift the narrative for future generations. As CEO, I see it as part of my responsibility to help open doors, elevate voices and ensure that our leadership reflects the communities we serve.

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?

Yes, I do see more women stepping into leadership roles in the dairy industry today than when I first began my career. It is encouraging to witness this shift.

Today, I see more women leading in areas like field operations, supply chain and cooperative governance. This progress is the result of many factors, including intentional mentorship, stronger networks and a growing recognition that diverse leadership leads to better outcomes.

Throughout my career within this cooperative, I have had the privilege to work in an environment that prioritizes performance, collaboration, integrity and alignment with our mission. Mentors have provided me with opportunities for development, challenging assignments where available, and I have consistently felt supported in my career growth potential.

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

If I could go back 10 years, I would tell myself that change in this industry is not only possible, but also essential. I would remind myself that the most meaningful progress often comes from steady, values-driven work that does not always make headlines but builds over time. I would say, stay grounded in your purpose and do not be afraid to speak up when something matters.

I would also remind myself that relationships are the foundation of everything. Whether it is with farmers, employees or partners, the strength of

our cooperative comes from the trust we build together. That trust is earned through consistency, transparency and shared commitment.

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And on a more personal note, I would tell myself to keep drawing strength from the people who have always believed in me. My parents were my first champions. They helped me believe that anything was possible, instilling the importance of willpower, perseverance and hard work. That belief has carried me through every challenge and helped shape the leader I am today.

Leadership is not about having all the answers. It is about asking the right questions, listening with intention and creating space for others to grow. That is the insight I would carry forward, and the one I try to live by every day.

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

As an independent, farmer-owned and governed cooperative, we engage in open discussions about challenges, ideas and solutions that benefit our members' collective interests. We are not bound by traditional methods and often explore innovative approaches that have not been previously attempted but serve the needs of our family farmers. Over the past year, I have been involved in teams addressing policy, standards, stable and mutually sustainable pay price philosophy and guiding principles, and balancing organic supply and demand amid dynamic market conditions.

Since 1988, our cooperative has been dedicated to addressing the issues faced by family farms with unique solutions, a principle that continues to remain central to our cooperative. **CMN**