



WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Driving innovation and growth in cheese and dairy



Katie Phillips is president and CEO of Dairy Connection Inc., Madison, Wisconsin

Q 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?

A For me, the most important attributes of a leader are staying calm and being prepared. The reality is that you cannot always predict what is coming, and even the best-laid plans can fall apart. Over time, I have learned that being mentally prepared for the unexpected helps me stay steady when things do not go as planned.

I try to be a calming presence for the team, especially during stressful moments. My focus is on staying calm, finding solutions and creating space for others to think clearly and work through challenges. Preparation helps with that. While I believe in having plans, I also stay flexible and open to change. Thinking ahead gives me more confidence and allows me to better support the team when things shift unexpectedly.

Ultimately, I think leadership is about showing up consistently and creating an environment where people feel supported and encouraged. If I can help the team stay focused and resilient, especially during uncertain times, then I feel like I am doing my job well.

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

A I'm fortunate to work in a part of the industry where women have long been well represented. The American artisan and farmstead cheese community, as we know it today, has a notable number of women who started their own farms and cheesemaking businesses. Many of them paved the

way for companies like ours. It's inspiring to now work alongside the next-generation owners who are continuing that legacy. Women also lead many of the cheese guilds across the country and are active in education, research and advocacy. While there is always room for more visibility and support, especially in broader industry narratives, I've seen firsthand how strong and influential women already are in this space.

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 adopted, and what are some things you have tried to avoid?

A The role models who've had the biggest impact on me are the ones who made me feel included and supported. They could see the direction I was trying to go and offered encouragement and guidance to help me get there. I always felt like they were genuinely rooting for me. I still connect with many of them at industry events, and I know I can reach out with questions anytime. That kind of support meant a lot to me, so I try to pay it forward by offering the same encouragement to others who might be on a similar path.

Q Can you please comment on the significance of working for a family-owned company and the pride you take in maintaining that legacy?

A Working for my family's business wasn't something I originally planned. Dairy Connection was always my dad's dream, and for a while, I wasn't sure where I fit in or what I could contribute. What started as a part-time job after college turned into a career I care deeply about. I may not be following the exact same path as my dad, but I share his passion for the dairy industry. There's a lot of opportunities ahead, and I'm proud

to carry on the legacy while also shaping the future of the business in my own way.



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Q 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?

A In a small business, personal connection can make the issue of representation feel less pressing than it might in a large organization where people don't know each other as well.

In my experience, I have never felt the need to prove myself as a woman to my coworkers because they see how I work, and it is hard to hide your contributions in a small team. That said, I do see how diversity and representation at the leadership level can be incredibly impactful in larger organizations. When leadership includes a range of backgrounds and perspectives, decision-making becomes more thoughtful and well-rounded. It also helps attract and retain talent because people are more likely to stay and grow in a company where they feel seen and valued. While small businesses may face challenges in building diverse teams, especially when the team has historically had limited variation in backgrounds and experiences, larger companies have the numbers and resources to lead the way. They can set an example by building inclusive leadership

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

A If I could go back 10 years, I would tell myself to find your people early. Figure out who you connect with and build from there. The dairy industry is close-knit, but it has many layers to explore. It is much more rewarding and enjoyable when you are working with people you genuinely like and want to support. Having friends in the industry brings a sense of comfort, and when you feel comfortable, you are more open to new ideas and opportunities.

Q What strategies do you use to help promote a positive and productive company or organizational culture?

A There are many ways to foster a positive and productive culture, but one strategy that works well for us is empowering team members to make decisions and contribute meaningfully to the company. As a small business, we do not have a traditional management structure. People often wear multiple hats, so we focus more on managing processes than managing people. This gives team members the autonomy to improve the systems they work in and builds trust across the team.

We also make sure employees are trained and confident in their roles, especially since many tasks are performed independently. That sense of ownership helps create a culture where people feel responsible and valued. A big part of making this work is recognizing that I do not need to know everything myself. Instead, I focus on finding team members who bring knowledge and strengths that complement mine. When everyone contributes their expertise, it elevates the whole team and helps us grow together. **CMN**