



Women in Leadership



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

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Please tell us about leadership experiences that have inspired your approach to building a team and driving action.

Like many people, I've encountered experiences I want to model and to avoid. Nobody is perfect. Talking through difficult circumstances can be a good approach as long as people bring up the real topics at hand. By that, I mean masking a problem does no good. I found it helpful to ask for input directly (i.e. "Sarah, do you have anything else to add?").

As a leader, I also know it's my job to help transform situations into a positive experience. I need to look at a perceived negative engagement and identify a lesson learned or the chance to more fully appreciate the alternate perspective. After major meetings or events my team has led, I've found it helpful to take the time to regroup and review what went well and what could be improved upon. To be effective, that reflection time needs to be planned and scheduled.

Taking the time to process and evaluate before responding is also important for me. My first impressions may influence a final decision; however, gathering additional information and taking time to make an educated choice is generally useful. However, at some point you need to decide and move forward. Inaction is a decision — an ineffective decision. To be certain, balancing the appropriate time needed to assemble information and make a decision isn't always easy.

Please share a time when you felt your insights presented a unique solution to a challenge at a company or organization — for example, your key role in leading the Wisconsin Initiative for Agricultural Exports?

In 2021, the Wisconsin Legislature proposed, and the governor signed into law, the Wisconsin Initiative for

Agricultural Exports, which created a five-year plan to boost agricultural exports with an emphasis on dairy. This allowed Wisconsin to strategically participate in trade activities and invite buyers and industry representatives to Wisconsin.

As a part of this journey, when I was the Division of Agricultural Development administrator at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP), DATCP leveraged industry partnerships, including those with USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service, the U.S. Dairy Export Council (USDEC), the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association, Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin, Center for Dairy Research and others. Working with these organizations provided deeper connections and industry insights. One example is how we collectively need to better understand market taste preferences before simply exporting American-style cheeses. As a part of this export enhancement journey, I traveled with companies and trade organizations on several USDA trade missions including to the Philippines, Japan, Kenya, Tanzania, India and a USDEC trade mission to China. During these engagements, I met with foreign agricultural leaders and discussed trade barriers, highlighted Wisconsin's attributes and always invited them to visit and see for themselves.

In 2024, agricultural leaders from multiple states attended World Dairy Expo. Wisconsin welcomed guests from around the globe, including a large group from Indonesia, to tour the state and participate in educational sessions. These relationships created value for the Wisconsin dairy industry and will continue to show benefits to Wisconsin, its farmers and other businesses long into the future.

What are some key things you have observed related to women in dairy industry leadership roles?

In recent years, I have seen tremendous growth for women in dairy leadership roles including at Dairy Management Inc. and USDEC, where women lead the organizations. These leadership roles are extending to the broader agricultural industry. Women are getting the necessary education (there are higher women enrollment numbers at universities) and experi-

ence by taking on meaningful projects further demonstrating their capabilities. There are certainly some areas that still need improvement, such as representation in organizational leadership in both production agriculture and the processing sector.

At the same time, women need to step up as well. Research shows women will not apply for a role unless they feel fully qualified, whereas men will apply if they have a few of the qualifications. Women need to be encouraged in different ways than men. Women may need help coming up with solutions to concerns such as, Should I take on a new role when I'm planning to get married or start a family? Are there others like me that have had a role like this? Who might be a mentor to help me grow in this new leadership role? We must remember that not all women are comfortable being trailblazers, and that means encouragement is a necessary ingredient on the journey.

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

Ten years ago, I'd tell myself to travel more internationally — to do it myself if needed. Going to foreign markets and having experiences abroad will become increasingly important. The growth in world demand for high-quality and safe nutrition will continue to be a tremendous opportunity for the U.S. dairy industry. Make the time now to learn a new language and practice your Spanish or other language that you believe will become an emerging market! Immersing yourself into a different culture will provide you with a unique perspective wherever you go. Developing relationships and getting comfortable in new and often uncomfortable environments will build your resilience and be fun. Don't delay — your life will get even busier. Make plans and go do it!

What advice would you give to younger generations?

When interacting with young people, I advise them to step outside of what is comfortable. I recommend they take a job and go to school away from home. When I graduated from Omro High School, moving to Madison,

Wisconsin, for college two hours away was like going to a new planet. My Madison experience opened many opportunities and challenges.

Moving to Minneapolis after college, then Nevada, Oregon and Kansas, gave me incredible life skills. It also paved the way for me to get married to the right person, when I was ready, and move back to the Midwest.

When you are young, the ability to travel is so much easier. You can always come home; however, the opportunity to be a longer distance away from those you know and are comfortable with will become increasingly difficult as you get older. Go live on the West Coast, live in a big city, take a four-day seminar in Puerto Rico and bring new ideas to your community when you return.

How do you see workplace and executive structures evolving with new generations and priorities? What strategies do you use to help promote a positive and productive company or organizational culture?

Emphasizing mission and culture in the hiring and onboarding process will ensure you are attracting and retaining the right talent. There may be many people who can do the job, but knowing if they have a passion for why they do their job and for who they are impacting with their work will make them stay. At Grande Cheese, we ensure the mission and culture are part of recruitment, hiring and retention. Mission and culture are central to our decisions and strategic planning. Grande has a two-year onboarding process for new associates that includes multiple activities, coaching and reflection that all help communicate the foundational principles of what it means to be part of the organization.

This is designed to provide a deep understanding of what we do and why we believe in Grande's mission and culture. This process provides information on how to perform the job, work with team members and an understanding of how their job links to the Grande mission while demonstrating mutual respect, acting with high ethics and integrity, and striving for excellence. Referring to the mission as we continue and start new initiatives helps to reinforce the importance, which helps create the Grande culture.

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