



# Women in Leadership



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

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**What leadership style do you feel has garnered a positive response throughout your career?**

Being genuine and inclusive. Nothing big gets done in a silo; most major projects are the culmination of hard work by multiple teams. Giving credit where it's due is important, as is drawing on the different areas of expertise people bring to the table.

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

Women in the dairy sector seem relatively well represented across our various industry organizations, and I've noticed that the dairy press appear to have been working to include more voices from women in dairy over the last few years. I think it's in company leadership roles, including board positions, where there is particular room for greater progress in building our pipelines feeding into those roles.

I think we've come a long way, yet — like so many other U.S. business sectors — are still in the growth phase of working to entice additional women into a more robust set of leadership roles across the industry.

**Who are some dairy industry leaders that inspire you? Have you had any mentors in the industry, and how have they helped you along your career journey?**

We're fortunate to have a number of really strong industry leaders right now, but two that have made a particular impression on me over the 20 years I've worked for the National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF) and U.S. Dairy Export Council (USDEC) have been Sue Taylor and Tom Camerlo. Sue retired over COVID but served for many years as the chair of USDEC's Trade Policy Committee; I was always impressed by how knowledgably and positively she made her voice heard and had an impact. Tom was the chairman of NMPF for many

years, and I had the luck to travel with him on trade policy trips a few times; he was a happy warrior who had such a tremendous impact in helping shift the industry toward an export orientation.

In addition to them, I've also been fortunate to have strong mentors within the NMPF/USDEC staff who've led by example and helped coach me along, particularly NMPF/USDEC's Jaime Castaneda. Those staff members have typically been men; their commitment to supporting staff growth by both men and women has been a big part of making it a positive and effective place to work.

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

We're a large industry spread all across the country so it's hard to generalize a simple yes or no answer to that question. Based on my experience — which I realize may differ from one spot to another — I think there are generally equal opportunities for advancement in our industry, but that reaching more comparable levels of representation requires a dedicated focus on why there are gender gaps in the leadership pipeline and what steps can be taken to encourage greater participation from women in those roles.

**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 do. I've worked for NMPF and USDEC for 20 years. Over that time, there's been a notable increase in women leaders on the organization side of the industry while the shift on the company side has been more incremental. I think that growth is in part a function of building the pipeline of staff with the right experience to step into those roles, which is why it's important to be looking at how the industry creates the right opportunities on that growth ladder over time.

**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?**

Whether it's in dairy or other sectors, we're not that many generations into it being common for women to be hired into the same spectrum of roles that men were. And at the outset of that, balancing a demanding career with child care was particularly challenging. Even in my generation, that's no piece of cake, but it certainly has improved, and it's difficult to discount the role that's played. More broadly, I think a key factor that's shifted over that time and had a big impact has been the views of men. The women leaders in our industry have typically been selected by strongly male boards that prioritize the expertise those individuals have to offer. There's an increasing priority on evaluating talent options from all corners.

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

Soliciting feedback from within a given company/organization on what some of the stumbling blocks to greater inclusion and advancement opportunities at that particular spot may be would be most impactful. I doubt there's a one-size-fits-all answer to this, so the more detailed the inside feedback, the better. For instance, at the World Dairy Summit last year I heard some great suggestions from Lorilee Schultz on how to expand the role of women in co-ops' young leadership structures; she's in those shoes and so had a firsthand view of where some of the clearest important avenues would be.

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

Shifting gears is inevitable. I have spent a sizable amount of time over the years working on trade negotiations that the U.S. government ultimately walked away from — the World Trade Organization Doha Round and the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement being the most significant. That's deeply frustrating knowing the time invested and the possibilities for export expansion on offer. But while those doors are closed — for now at least — others remain open. Maximizing those routes is incredibly important.

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

At my first job out of college — a position with an economic consulting firm — I recall noticing that a formula we were using as one of the central calculations for the multiyear case I was working on didn't appear to be appropriate. I raised the observation with my supervisor, who elevated it to our company's president, who had me then walk the client through the issue and the recommendation. Thereafter I was the go-to point person for several additional requests on the case by that client. I recall being impressed with the willingness to be open to new thoughts, even if they were coming from one of the lowest rungs on the totem pole — as I certainly was just a couple years out of college.

**How can the industry motivate the next generation of women to pursue a career in dairy?**

Partnering with universities that have strong animal science, food safety and other relevant programs to capture promising candidates at the earliest stages of their careers could help us. I also think the outreach work so many checkoffs are involved in is important as well though, too. We have a lot of people in the industry who didn't grow up in dairy, yet found their way to it and are extremely passionate about working in dairy — myself included. Introducing the various exciting jobs within dairy to those without farm backgrounds can be a way to expand our talent pool. Drawing on women speakers from leaders across our industry to help reach these groups could help with motivating women at those early crucial career decision points.

**What are some steps you would like to see organizations take at the high school/college level to encourage more women in leadership positions?**

I think at the high school and college level there's often more gender parity in leadership positions. A key priority is cultivating a continuation of that as they shift into the career world. That's not simply because it's "nice to do" but so that our industry is drawing and building up its leaders from the largest pool possible to help select strong candidates from a broad range of options. CMN