



# Women in Leadership



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

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**In an industry with continuous innovation, what inspires you to think creatively and foster creativity among your colleagues?**

In one of my first major jobs, my role reported to a research and development (R&D) leader, who characterized all R&D projects as “innovation” and ensured our performance was assessed annually by our ability to incorporate innovation and continuous improvement into day-to-day work. Spending years practicing that really shaped my on-the-job strategies toward work projects. I found myself learning to ask: How could this be done differently? How could it be done better? Is there something I can be doing to change how I'm thinking about this problem that will help me find a better solution? Who could I ask to help me see this from a different perspective? It took some time for those practices to cement, but I find that I still think along those lines today, and tapping that creative brainstorming is one of the most invigorating aspects of my job.

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

Ten years ago I was just getting to know the dairy industry through government policy work, and I had no idea how relationship-oriented and connected the industry is. I quickly created a reputation for myself without realizing anyone knew or cared who I was, and I vastly underestimated both the value of relationships within the industry and how long people stay in the industry. If I could go back to that younger version of me, I would give her a “101” on dairy industry structure, business relationships and the culture of the dairy industry.

**Please tell me about your involvement in IDFA's Women in Dairy initiative. What advantages does involvement in a group like this bring to your role in the industry?**

I recently took over leading IDFA's Women in Dairy network, and it has been a whirlwind of stimulating and long-overdue conversations. Many of the participants have told me how refreshing it is to simply be able to have open conversations about biases they experience and invisible barriers they feel they face within the sector. But underlying these important conversations is the fact that IDFA's Women in Dairy network is leading the charge in the U.S. dairy industry's efforts to implement the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on Gender Equality, specifically through target 5.5. I personally am really excited about how IDFA's Women in Dairy network can dig in and contribute further to UN SDG target 5.5.

**What is a strategy you've utilized to make sure you, and other women in your organization, are heard?**

I've been told mentorship is one of my strengths, so I try to lean into that. Where a female colleague may struggle to speak up in a group or consider herself equal, I try to encourage her through one-on-one engagement. Or where I can see she may be struggling to know how to build a strategy or unpack a complex topic, I offer to sit down and flesh it out together so that she can take the end-product back and run with it as her own. We all need teachers as we continue to learn and grow, so I try to make sure I am consistently looking for areas where I may have learned a lesson that someone else has not yet, to see if I can help them on their journey.

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

Many federal employees will start their careers in the government and then progress to the private sector later in their careers, but I did the opposite — I spent five years in the private sector before a decade of federal service. Having that foundation in business gave me a real-life view of the impacts of policymaking that many of my federal colleagues didn't have. I was able to explain how regulations could be more trade facilitative while achieving their objective, why certain regulations are considered burdensome from the private sector perspective and what kinds of

commitments might be useful in trade agreements. Having that unique perspective consistently helped me advance business-sense policies throughout my career in the federal government.

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

I would personally love to see IDFA member companies welcome the next generation of women into dairy by leading by example. The phenomenon of women experiencing a “broken rung” in their career ladder by missing out on promotions and managerial positions is well-documented. If dairy companies can lead the way in making sure we aren't contributing to that broken rung, but rather repairing it, we'll build a sound sector that naturally attracts the next generation because the opportunities would be self-evident.

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

I do see women being fairly well-represented, but there is a big difference between being represented and legitimately having equal opportunities, voice and influence. Earlier this year, IDFA conducted a brief survey which found that an alarming 61% of women surveyed felt their gender had played a role in their missing out on a raise, promotion or chance to get ahead. Representation may be encouraging, but we need to make sure it is not just window dressing over the underlying reality our survey results revealed.

**Is there a time you felt blatantly discriminated against in your career because of your gender, and if so, how did you address it?**

I think it's rare to meet a woman who hasn't felt this! Yes, this has happened to me; probably the most memorable time I experienced discrimination was the time male colleagues found out I was selected for a prestigious two-year work assignment at a high-level political agency. Instead of congratulating me, several male colleagues who happened to know I was a single mother

came to me with comments questioning my ability to manage the temporary assignment and asking me whether I had considered how it would impact my parenting and home life. I even had one male colleague express anger that I was leaving my role. In each of these occasions I simply reassured them that I had thought it through and thanked them for their thoughts.

I can't think of a time that I have commented on a male colleague's home life or questioned his parenting when male colleagues have received promotions or reassignments — just congratulations.

**Do you believe the cheese/dairy industry as a whole is supportive of women?**

I think the dairy industry is a work in progress when it comes to supporting women — that's why initiatives like IDFA's Women in Dairy still exist. If the support were truly there, IDFA wouldn't have monthly gatherings of over a hundred women and a network of over 900 women who are all there with the sole purpose of connecting with one another for greater support. That being said, initiatives like ours have the potential to change the future for the better and create a more inclusive industry for women, so we are excited about that.

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

There are a lot of dairy industry leaders — men and women alike — who inspire me. I have learned a lot from DairyAmerica CEO Patti Smith, The Ice Cream Club Director Heather Draper and from IDFA President and CEO Michael Dykes. Each of these leaders and many more have taught me the importance of courage, authenticity, humility, integrity and generosity over the course of my interactions with them. They also live out in actions the character traits they espouse by going out of their way to encourage and mentor me regularly. I have found their leadership inspiring and believe that kind of leadership will be what unites our industry in the future and creates the inclusive and supportive environment we're seeking to build for women in dairy. CMN