WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Driving innovation and growth in cheese and dairy

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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 The most important attributes of a leader are clear communication, collaboration and trust, all of which are core capabilities across any leadership roles (formal or informal). In my role as vice president at CoBank, I seek clarity around priorities, empower internal teams with ownership and keep people motivated around execution while managing risks thoughtfully. When that balance is right, we are able to deliver results for the organization and high-impact outcomes for our customers.

Q Thinking of leaders 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 I have learned the value of direct communication, active listening and creating space for honest feedback. The strongest leaders I have worked with make decisions grounded in facts and build trust through consistency and transparency. I have tried to carry those qualities forward while avoiding behaviors that create ambiguity or erode trust.

Q What role do you think leaders play in strengthening trust between the dairy industry and consumers, especially around transparency, nutrition and sustainability?

A Dairy industry leaders play an essential role in building consumer confidence and trust by promoting a values-driven approach, transparency, reinforcing dairy's nutritional value and helping people better understand how their food is produced. We can showcase dairy's value to consumers by consistently sharing dairy's story from farm to processor to product, highlighting how we produce milk, transform milk and deliver high-quality dairy products. In each step we can highlight the care, innovation and commitment behind every step in the process. People connect with people who care, and who better to care about dairy than the farmers, processors and manufacturers who make the high-quality dairy products we all enjoy.

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Q What advice would you give to young women who are hesitant about pursuing leadership roles in traditionally male-dominated industries?

A The advice I give other women wanting leadership growth is to trust your voice, seek out mentors and step into opportunities before you feel fully ready — because growth and confidence come from experience, not perfection. I encourage other women to not let your circumstances or your environment define your potential. Rather, I feel it is best to stay authentic, build strong relationships and focus on consistently delivering value and results.

Q How do you see technology (automation, AI and data-driven decision-making) shaping leadership in the dairy industry, and what skills will leaders need most in the next decade?

A Technology is going to elevate leaders from decision-makers to decision strategists, leveraging data and AI insights to see around corners and future opportunities. With that, leaders will need to pair technology with their judgment and relationships to make better decisions. The current and future leaders of the dairy industry will need to leverage technology including but not limited to automation, artificial intelligence, data-driven decision-making and overhead management. The leaders who will stand out are the leaders that can translate data into results, strategy and support their teams through accelerated change.

Q How do you balance authenticity with professionalism in your leadership style?

A I balance authenticity with professionalism by being transparent, approachable and focused while staying grounded in responsibility and results. For me, that means communicating clearly, leading with facts, encouraging a feedback loop and following through on commitments. It is about building real trust while making sure my actions and decisions reflect the responsibility of leadership.

Q How do you see women contributing to the dairy industry in areas where they haven't been as visible in the past? How do you think this has changed the industry for the better?

A There are currently at least five women dairy cooperative CEOs, many women leaders on boards for dairy companies and more women in senior industry roles than ever before. Women are bringing diverse perspectives and strong leadership into executive management, governance and strategic decision making. This is strengthening the dairy industry by improving collaboration, communication and innovation, all while helping dairy better connect with our customers and diverse stakeholders.

Q How do you navigate leading during times of disruption, whether it is supply chain shifts, policy changes or evolving consumer expectations?

A I find the best way to lead through disruption is to stay grounded in the facts, communicating clearly and frequently, and keep everyone focused on what matters most so we can collectively make the best decisions in a changing environment. Just as important, I stay closely connected to customers and industry trends so we can adapt proactively and turn challenges into opportunities. At CoBank, we expect change to occur, and it is why we have a focused Knowledge Exchange Division team of 11 economists including two industry-leading dairy economists who help us stayed informed and looking to the future.

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

A Dairy is complex, but not complicated — that's what I tell anyone new to the industry. Dairy is one of the most wholesome, dynamic and functional foods producing everyday staples like milk, butter, ice cream and yogurt while continuing to evolve with innovation in health, wellness and better-for-you products. I am excited about the future of dairy products.

Q What lessons from outside the dairy industry have you brought into your role that made a big impact?

A The biggest impact has been bringing my range of banking experience in agriculture. During my career, I have financed all sized agribusinesses from small family farms to publicly-traded agriculture companies. This experience has helped me support customers to make more informed investment and capital decisions. That perspective has been especially valuable as the dairy industry navigates large-scale transformation and investing capital in ways that support long-term growth and resilience. **CMN**