

## Women in Leadership Positions in Canadian Agriculture

DAWN BETANCOURT | THOMPSONS LTD. [BLENHEIM, ONTARIO]

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My career path is fairly unique, particularly for a woman. I have moved 6 times, family in tow, as I moved through an organization that treated me with respect, while allowing me to grow into positions. I believe my career developed and prospered by doing things that literally NO ONE else would do.

As a working mother of two children, with no real goal at the end to be anything more than a good provider, mother and dedicated employee, here I am as the President of a Thompsons Limited. And... a company in Canada to boot. I started as an hourly employee, in 1987, receiving \$6.32 an hour. I had just received my Bachelor's Degree from Michigan State University in Ag Econ, and the agriculture economy then was not profitable in general. At that time, corn was \$1.70 a bushel and beans were around \$3.50. It was a tough time in Ag. I was happy to find a job in at The Andersons, in agriculture. I landed with a good company, but was very unhappy with the pay and the job skills required. But hey, it was a start. I did all the grunt work. I created spreadsheets, analyzed, data, put out bids, basically did what anyone asked me to do. I started answering phones and creating relationships with customers quite quickly. It didn't take long and we all knew I needed to be in sales and creating relationships. I, without being asked to, mentored with others that were doing the job and quite frankly did exactly as they did, but better. I had to. I had something to prove. And you know why I was better? Because I cared.... I've have always cared about my customers, my peers, and my family. It's important that people see that you put in the time and energy, and that you are passionate about something. I was passionate about understanding the business, and doing the best thing for both the company I worked for, and the customer. I think I have always been good at riding that line. Many in sales struggled with that, but I have always lived by the motto, its win/win. If someone loses, the relationship will terminate.

### **Tell us about your role and what your "typical day" looks like.**

As you can see, I started at the bottom and worked my way through multiple jobs throughout the organization. I moved to another location after 4 years in the business and really focused on producer originations, including FOB/Direct ship bushels. We created quite a team in the small town of White Pigeon, Michigan. We were small but mighty. 5 years later, I moved to Indiana, and managed a team of 5 originators, and then branched out into multiple locations. This is where I discovered my real passion, managing people. Managing people, while creating lifelong relationships with producers has been a blessing for me. Over the years, I became the General Manager of all facilities in Indiana, as well as an Ethanol plant in Indiana and simultaneously in Ohio. I then moved back to Maumee, Ohio where I became the Sales Director for the company. (which meant I was responsible for the originations for the company). The Company then acquired and built elevators in Nebraska and Iowa. I became VP of the Western Region and went out west to integrate those businesses into our own. In June of 2013, I was asked to come to Canada and run a company that we had acquired, Thompsons Limited. I had no idea what the company was about, where it was, or what Canada was like. My husband and I drove to Blenheim, Ontario one weekend, and never looked back.

### **How do you define personal success? What steps do you take to get there?**

To be successful, it's important to push yourself. Get outside your comfort zone. I practically live outside my comfort zone. Yes, there are days when it is very scary. It can be very overwhelming,

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but, it can be very rewarding. My greatest passion today is watching others succeed. It's pushing people that either don't know how to push themselves, or don't know how far they can go. Complacency is the worst evil a person or a company can have. Complacency will cause one to lose business, will cause one to lose drive, and hence you end up bored, scared and others beating you to the punch, both personally and professionally. It's a bad place to be.

### **What's the biggest professional/personal challenge you've had to face?**

My biggest professional challenge at first, (mind you was in the late eighties, early nineties), was getting producers to take you seriously as a woman. However, I did not get caught up in why people chose to talk to me, or what people said. Once I got in the door, I was determined to show them I was knowledgeable, caring, and had their best interests in mind. I was a legitimate sales person that they NEEDED to do business with. I made it very clear that my expectations were to buy it all... I wanted to earn their business and would do what it would take to earn it. I became so important to their business that they could not function without my insight and my knowledge. As a manager, becoming a coach and mentor, leading by example, and creating an environment of accountability and empowerment are keys to success. Respecting others and what they bring to the table, focusing on the strengths vs. the weaknesses have always been my goals.

### **Who is (or has been) your biggest influencer/mentor? What have you learned from them?**

The people I admire most in this business are people that can focus on the positives, create an engaging atmosphere, while asking questions to lead you to the right answer. I tend to be a bit more direct and am challenged to keep asking the questions. I tend to have an answer in mind, although knowing it is not always the best answer, I will always have one. I have high expectations of those around me and myself. Hence, I believe people can do more than they think they can. Challenging people in a productive way, and watching them grow is very rewarding. People have to want it for themselves. In no way can I inspire someone to do something they didn't think they could do, if they don't want to. There is no doubt I wear my emotion on my sleeve at times. There is good and bad in that. I put 100% into all I do, and I expect that of others. If they do not, or if I get caught up in the emotion from time to time, it can be both detrimental and helpful. I think it's helpful in the fact that people realize you are human too. There is no perfect. It does not exist. Falling down, getting back up is the best learning experience anyone can have. Making mistakes is just part of the growth. Believe me I've made lots!! Emotions as a negative can come into play when making decisions from your heart vs. your brain from time to time. OR being a woman people tend to look at emotions as weak. I realize that and attempt to keep that at a minimum. (Part of understanding you are a woman in a man's world, Agriculture)

### **Learning from our mistakes is an important, but sometimes tough, part of life. In the spirit of these profiles helping others, are you willing to share a mistake you made but taught you something important?**

I have made multiple mistakes trying to not be me, a woman, when I was in situations that I thought I needed to be something different. I thought I needed to be more stoic, or less emotional, or even less hard core. In the end, being you, whoever that is, will lead you to the place you belong. If you are trying to be something you are not, it will be difficult to succeed, personally or professionally.

#### Do you have a piece of advice for young women starting their career in agriculture?

Women bring so much to the table when it comes to commitment, passion, enthusiasm, engagement, knowledge, multi-tasking, creativity that having them on your team can be a real asset. Women need to lift each other up. Create an environment that they can be successful with each other, not in spite of each other. That means sometimes we have to move forward with issues or feelings of discontent. Harboring those feeling, and creating negativity around them can be very damaging to any environment. We may not like people saying that women harbor some discontent and at times can be very damaging to their own career. In my experience, in both countries, women tend to do those things more than men. This creates a potentially toxic environment to work in. Don't hold grudges. Move forward, resolve issues, hit them head on, and create an environment of success. Believe in yourself, as a woman that can make a difference. We, as women, do have a lot to offer. We need to hold ourselves in high esteem. We cannot allow others to bring us down based on our gender, and maybe more importantly we cannot be negative about ourselves. Confidence.... We are strong and mighty, but we have to believe it ourselves. The best way to do that is put your best foot forward 110% of the time and earn the respect of others around you. When you do that, there is no place to go but forward, forward in your career, in your relationships, and in life.