

Women leading women in new directions in ag

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Mary Morrissey, president and owner of Life Solutions that Work, LLC, discussed the five steps for "Empowered Goal Setting" to greatly increase the speed, balance and precision in results.

If women, particularly young women, could see more strong female role models in agriculture, it might help them meet their challenges and inspire them to be more successful.

That's the premise behind a unique conference held last April in Calgary, Alberta.



The Advancing Women Conference was the brainchild of veteran conference organizer Iris Meck. After several years working for ag enterprises, Meck formed Iris Meck Communications Inc. nearly 16 years ago.

The company plans six to eight events each year, many within the ag industry. It was in the midst of this work that the idea came to her.

"I was reviewing lists of possible presenters when I realized there were no women on the list," Meck says. "In my years in the ag industry, I worked with women, but where were they?"

So she set about finding female leaders and designing a conference that would bring them to the forefront. The target audience was women from all facets of the ag industry.

"I wanted to offer women an opportunity to network, gain insight and be inspired and motivated to reach their full potential," Meck says.



Meck says they anticipated around 250 attendees when planning began. Nearly 400 registered from six Canadian provinces, five U.S. states and more than 150 organizations. “It just shows how much interest and need there is to discuss leadership among women,” she says.

April’s program featured such noted presenters as Fran Burr, assistant vice president of marketing with Cargill, with her presentation “Beyond Gender;” and Angela Santiago, CEO and founder of The Little Potato Company with “Raising a CEO.” Speaker Mary Morrissey, president and owner of Life Solutions That Work, LLC, provided tips for setting and achieving goals:

- A smart goal is specific, measurable and realistic.
- You don’t always have to know how to achieve your goal; just know what your goal is.
- Do not put your goals on the altar of somebody else’s approval.
- The more you focus on your ambitions, the more you will seize opportunities on the path to your success.
- The real purpose of a goal isn’t just about achieving it. It’s about the growth that happens and who you become in the process.



It’s just that type of professional wisdom that attracted Kate Davies to the conference. Davies works with the Dairy Research and Extension Consortium of Alberta (DRECA), a partnership among the University of Alberta, University of Calgary, Alberta Ag and Rural Development, and Alberta Milk. “It’s a bridge between the dairy industry and research sectors,” Davies says. “[It’s] a way to jointly address industry issues.”

In her role as communicator, her audience is large and varied, and she says she appreciated the opportunity provided by the conference to focus on her own skills and abilities and how to use them for positive change.

“As women in ag, we often find ourselves trying to do it all,” Davies says. “It can be hard to find balance between work and home and find ways to be kind to ourselves.”

Finding balance in life is the key message of the conference, according to Meck. “It’s a life-skills conference. It’s about mental and physical health and how that leads to professional success.”

The message is essentially broken down into four pillars: financial, relationships, communication and health. Women need to have the tools to achieve and maintain their own financial security.

They need to develop communication skills to work with all facets of business, as well as utilize their network.

“There is plenty of opportunity for networking at the conference,” Meck says. And that means developing relationships that may prove invaluable once back in the workplace.

Solid business relationships are essential to success – but so are sound personal ones. “Women often strive to be the perfect mother, daughter, sister, wife, all while trying to achieve greatness in their business life,” Meck says.

“One of the points was picking where to expend energy,” Davies says, and the acknowledgement that doing everything isn’t always possible.

“It’s a challenge to balance all those elements,” Meck says. “And none of it is possible if you don’t maintain your health.”

The challenges faced by women in agriculture are very real, according to Meck, who says she sees the issues first-hand. “I’ve known those women who put in the long hours and contribute their talents to projects only to be passed up at the end for the promotion or the board position.”

She adds that it is especially disconcerting in light of the growing number of young women choosing ag as a career.

That’s also a concern for Davies, who would like to give her younger colleagues all the help she can. “A lot of people have helped me along the way,” Davies says, “and I’d like to do the same for them. It’s about paying it forward.”

Born and raised in England, Davies grew up on a dairy farm, then worked for a seed company and an auction house before coming to Canada.

“It was a time where there weren’t many women working in ag, and I guess I was just clueless, blind to the issues.” But she wants to make sure barriers are removed for young women, and that often means dispensing with self-imposed ones.

“As more women succeed in ag, these young women will have more role models. And that may make their challenges less intimidating,” Davies adds.

“We now have four generations of women working in agriculture,” Meck says. “They see things differently and even communicate differently.” And that means added challenges as she plans next year’s conference. In light of the overwhelming response to the inaugural event, two venues are booked for 2015.

There will be a western Canadian conference in Calgary in April, and another in the eastern part of the country, in Toronto, in October.

For content inspiration, Meck is relying on feedback from this year’s participants. “One thing about women, when you ask for their feedback, you get it,” Meck says, adding that post-conference questionnaires expressed thoughtful responses focusing on interest in more time to network, more speakers and more exhibits.

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