

MWAF Champions interview: Loralee Orr

Work title: Marketing Communications leader for Canada

Educational background:

Degree in crop protection, double major in Plant sc. & entomology, Univ. of Manitoba.

1. What are the main milestones of your career?

Two days after graduation I started my job at Dow Elanco. My job involved doing plots and launching products in Brandon, MB and working with farmers. It was an internship and therefore, not permanent. In 1997, in the same company, I had an opportunity to start a full-time job in sales which allowed me to break into the industry. Shortly after that the company became Dow AgroSciences. I worked for about 9 years doing sales, plus other things like facilitating courses, and recruiting students. I got married, had children and went into a different direction. We moved to Calgary and, not having family around, I requested an opportunity to work in less than full-time capacity to manage work and the needs of a young family. It was a project-management job where I was able to obtain certification as a six-sigma black belt. That was a milestone. In 2012, I was offered a role in communications. My background with science and experience calling on farmers in sales definitely helps me in this role.

As I see it, there have been 3 phases: 1) sales, 2) project management and strategies, which was very interesting because it involved projects that touched all aspects of the Canadian business, and now 3) communications. With Corteva Agriscience, I am the Marketing Communications leader for Canada, and a member of the Canadian and Global leadership teams. I am really enjoying having a seat at the table!

2. What were the reasons of your milestones?

When I moved out of sales to the six-sigma role, that was a turning point for me. At that point I was comfortable in the sales role and enjoyed my work but I was looking for new opportunities. Also, at the time, I wanted a new challenge but also something structured, i.e., a team where we could build together. So, there were two motivations, i.e., 1) a career one and 2) a personal one, which lead to the change. Of course, then Corteva Agriscience precipitated the lead to the marketing communications leader Canada.

3. What motivates you in good times and through road blocks?

I absolutely love people. Last week I attended a talk by Chris Hadfield speaking about when things go wrong. He said that he doesn't know why we call it "wrong", essentially that is just life! When we have to deal with road blocks, that's when you get to make choices and really use your skills as a leader. Being part of a team and having that team atmosphere in good times is awesome and in times of struggle it's what gets me motivated and helps me to get through the challenges. For me, the team means working together to come up with solutions. When there are road blocks, you need to step back because something is not working. Getting together and working together is the way to find the solution. It is important to take the time and listen what everyone says. Sometimes is challenging but it's important that we don't come to conclusions too soon and that we listen.

4. Did you see yourself as a taking a leadership role in this field before?

As soon as I started my sales position, my goal was to work for 2 years and then travel the world. But when I started my career, I enjoyed it so much that I was motivated to do the best that I could and hopefully enter into a leadership position within this company.

5. Why are you involved with gender issues in ag?

When I started I was the only woman in field sales in MB. Today it's very different, over half of the sales force is female. Working as an underrepresented group presents challenges, and you have to do things a little different from the rest. We are still underrepresented at the leadership level, there are still opportunities to get more diversity in positions such as management roles.

6. Please comment on what's been going on with women in ag up to now? What's going on now? What do you see happening in the future?

I see lots of momentum and discussions. There are leaders that are connecting with others, mentorships and connections which are hugely important to encourage those that are in the industry to stay and become leaders. There are still opportunities for women on boards and leadership positions. Corteva is planning to talk and engage more with consumers and women are great at it. There is still work to do but definitely there are lots of positive things happening.

7. What are you doing now? Why?

I have a new team and we have a new company that in June will become a stand-alone agricultural company. It's an exciting time in my career. We have opportunities now to look at what we are doing and evaluate how to do it better. When I am not on the job I'm spending time with my two boys, 9 & 12, hoping to develop boys that will go out into the world and make their own way to contribute to society. I visit lots of hockey rinks and baseball diamonds in my spare time.

8. What would you like to leave behind you after retirement?

I think this is something that you don't think about on day-to-day basis. I would love to have people within this industry that I influenced or mentored or helped with a decision along the way, i.e., a group of people that feel that I made a positive impact on their careers or choices. It'd be excellent to stay in touch with them as I retire. I had people like that in my life and feel that's invaluable.

9. What do you think are the most important characteristic good leaders should have?

They need to have a balance between patience and impatience. On the patience side, they need to be able to step back, listen and try to understand the whys, where people are coming from. On the impatience side, I think leaders should be able to know when to make a decision and not to wait until everything is perfect or clear, or have all the data.

10. What do you think is necessary to engage industry in gender conversations and make progress for the women's file in Canada?

I think that there are certain key players within the industry that need to step up and make women's engagement a focus point. Corteva is committed to efforts both internally and externally to focus on diversity including women's engagement because it makes a huge difference.