

MWAF interview:

Nancy Tout, Champion of Diversity & Inclusion at Syngenta

Work title/s: Head Research & Development, Syngenta Canada Inc.

Educational background: B.Sc. and Ph.D. in Biology

1. What are the main milestones of your career?

I have to say that some of the most important milestones came from my education. I spent 10 years in post-secondary education which is something I feel really proud of. Though initially heading in a different direction, my degrees in science allowed me to get my first job at Syngenta where I've been ever since. I had a couple of great opportunities, moving into new roles every 2-3 years, until reaching my current position as Head of Research & Development. Reaching a position of leadership so early in my career was definitely another milestone. I've also enjoyed being in a position to lead diversity and inclusion within our organization.

Part of the reason for reaching these milestones in Syngenta is my drive for continuous learning. I had good mentors too. It is important to surround yourself with good people. They were able to see me in the new roles, even if I didn't, and encouraged me to do it. We, women, can doubt ourselves, something that's called the "impostor syndrome". It's important that we talk among ourselves about it and recognize that we have the ability and confidence needed to take on new challenges.

I never shy away from wanting to be my best, as a scientist, as the best mother for my two children and the best partner to my spouse. In fact, people told me to step away from trying always to be the best, to excel at everything, and stepping away from perfection. For me achieving work-life balance has been extremely difficult. For instance, when my children were young, in the mornings I would see mothers walking their children to school while me, instead, would drop them off at the daycare. It was very difficult. Having balance in your life is very important but also different for each one and, it is not always perfect. Burn out is a real thing. At the time it was hard for me to balance career and family, and because of travel, could not always be with my children and participate in their activities. At the time, a woman told me, to instead, involve my children in my work, not shield them from it. That way they grew up and saw what I do and understand my role. Today as adults, they're my biggest advocates and cheerleaders.

2. What were the reasons of your milestones?

According to feedback received from others, the reason is that I always have a very positive, can-do attitude. I am not afraid of rolling up my sleeves either and can be part of change. How we go about change matters. People told me that I am a collaborator/communicator, excel in what I do and that I have an extraordinary work ethics. Also, I had really good mentors in Syngenta, both men and women. My family and children inspired me. You think that as parents we shape our children, but in return, they give back and shape who you are as well, having a very positive impact on my leadership capabilities.

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

Having good people around me motivates me through good and bad times. My team is very important; they are my family and friends, like an extension of my personal life. They help me through road blocks and successes. It is also important to minimize the voices that don't matter and are negative. I am also self-motivated.

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

It's funny, at first, I thought no but then, looking back, I realize that I always took on leadership roles, even doing things as simple as just raising my hand. I do things because I enjoy them and, in part because I am competitive, I can't lie. I never imagined that I would've taken all the steps I did, and ended up as Head of R&D in my late 30s. I didn't map out that pathway. I aspired to do things and do them well.

Regarding taking leadership on women's issues, as soon as Syngenta started talking about diversity and inclusion, our President at the time, Jay Bradshaw, named me the champion to advance the topic. I was very passionate about it because I could relate to it from my days in science. At the time, when I was doing my Ph.D. I was part of an organization called "promoting women in science". That was because I had noticed that women are underrepresented in science. The barriers back then are still the same today. From the R&D perspective we need to make better decisions, and that can come only when we truly embrace and leverage the differences within people, including gender. That's why we did the Connect to Catalyze event, we wanted to start the conversation. I've been working on diversity at the global level for the last 5 years. Now I would like to continue my work outside Syngenta and give back to the industry to advance diversity and inclusion.

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

Very early on I noticed the lack of role models and that women were underrepresented. Also, I had very strong parenting and was told that I could do anything I wanted. A small example is a job I had very early on. At that time, I had a job that required working in a corn field all day and of course that didn't come with washrooms, nor did the school bus. I told my mother about it. She took it upon herself to write to write a letter to the company and in doing so, took on a battle and no doubt faced many negative comments from people. Even though my mom gave up her career in teaching and worked at home raising her family, my mother was a trailblazer. I am involved in gender issues because some of the challenges we had before are still here. I would like to create a better space for my daughter and son and future generations as my mother did for me.

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?

Up to now women have been coming together, talking and sharing, which has had a positive impact. Their voice within companies and social media is stronger. In the future, however, we need to have, what we call at Syngenta, "crucial conversations", to talk about difficult subjects, e.g., wage gap and others. With Connect to Catalyze, we tried to create a space where we could talk in a safe environment. Now we need another Connect to Catalyze 2.0. If the Canadian industry wants to lead, we need to have the conversation and involve all groups, e.g., industry, academics, non-profits, etc. No one can do it all on its own. We need an activation phase coming out of Connect to Catalyze and I want to be involved in it.

7. What are you doing now? Why?

I had another milestone this year. As I turned 50 years old and became an empty nester, I'm wondering about my future. I feel that I am at a crossroad. I've spent 10 years in my role as Head of R&D, moving the team forward. Now I would like to give more to the industry, for instance in the diversity and inclusion space, attracting the best talent to Syngenta and other ways. I feel I have the energy to do something bigger and broader.

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

I'd like to have made a difference in the lives of others, moved agriculture forward with innovations to the producer. I also want to give back by volunteering. Currently I volunteer for Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation and Diabetes Canada as a Research Information Volunteer and as a Board member, respectively.

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

1) Great listening skills, 2) inclusive leadership capability to leverage the broad perspectives and talent within the team to make decisions and 3) ability to inspire, recognize and reward others

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

We continue to come together and have a conversations about it. Now we need to take action and measure progress. No one group can resolve or take it all on its own. I like the words someone told me, i.e., "Better Together". To make a real impact we also need to engage the men who are leaders in the industry. They and all the groups can help co-create the measurable actions we need.