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THE NATION'S FARM



BUSINESS MAGAZINE

Lisa Worthington:
Showing
leadership in
Merino textiles

World Grains:
Balancing food, feed
and biofuel demand

*VIAscan emerging for
value-based marketing*

Setting up for station tourism



Women taking on leading roles in agribusiness

As a continuation from last month's issue, discussing some of the agribusiness sector's women in leadership and what it takes to make it, here are Juleigh Robins' and Lisa Worthington's stories. Both women are leaders in their industries and both have seen a change in the last 15 or so years in terms of women's being taken seriously in senior positions in industry, having experienced the challenges of negotiating and triumphing in environments that were challenging.

Lisa Worthington

The Merino Company (TMC) has a wool pooling system that aims to provide growers with stable and sustainable returns, and ensures customers' supply. With one manufacturing plant in New Zealand, access to another in Vietnam, and having entered into a joint venture with a Chinese manufacturer, TMC also provides fibre, textiles and garments to large international brands.

The reins of TMC are in the capable hands of Lisa Worthington, the company's chief operating officer.

For Lisa, leadership is simply about setting the right example and being consistent in the work place. "People like to feel that they are an integral part of an organisation. They want to be kept informed and understand what it is the business is trying to achieve. At TMC we want all our staff to feel part of the team and understand that everyone's actions contribute to the success of the business. If you can develop a sense of ownership, it is much easier to get the best out of people."

Immersed in the agribusiness, but especially the wool industry, throughout her life, Lisa grew up on a NSW sheep, wheat and cattle property. After finishing her schooling locally, she attended the University of NSW and graduated with a Bachelor of Applied Science in Wool and Pastoral Science. There, Lisa says, she gained invaluable work experience with a wool trading business. Thus, when she later entered the testosterone-driven, often aggressive environment of a wool auction to bid herself, she wasn't intimidated.

"I'm fortunate not to be shy," says Lisa. Shrugging off the experi-

Lisa Worthington contends diversity in leadership is a good thing because both genders provide different points of view on any given subject.



LEADERSHIP

ence of the odd auctioneer who wouldn't acknowledge her, and refusing to tolerate rudeness when an auctioneer began proceedings with the traditional, "Good morning, gentlemen," she would add, "And ladies! Or how about simply, 'buyers?'"

Lisa's career evolved in an almost 100% male dominated industry, which in those days valued tradition and the 'old school tie'. She says that sometimes being a woman in a male dominated area was challenging, and she accepts that there were many organisations who wouldn't have considered employing a woman, but her ability and work ethic paved her way to the top.

Having traversed many roles in the wool industry, from Technical Officer to Wool Trading Coordinator/Wool Buyer and Trader, Lisa rose to her current position at TMC, finding time to have two children along the way. She works full-time, but manages to keep her life balanced with techniques that allow her to combine motherhood and career. For example, as a general rule, she doesn't schedule meetings before 10am or after 4pm and, as she walks out of the office, she tells herself, "I've done the very best I could do today, and the world's not going to collapse over those four or five things I didn't get finished." This flexible attitude benefits Lisa's staff, male and female, as well as her family, and helps to keep work in perspective.

On the subject of gender, Lisa says that things have changed during the last 15 or so years and society has come to realise that women are as skilled as men. She doesn't subscribe to the practice of measuring women's performances and accomplishments by determining how much female representation exists in entities such as company boards and the political arena. If any type of measurement is to be done, it should be of women's contributions to their communities, which are extensive. Lisa feels that defining a woman's accomplishments by her position in a hierarchy is a negative stance, as it doesn't fully take into account what she has achieved.

Diversity in leadership is a good thing because both genders provide different points of view on any given subject. However, Lisa thinks that a 50:50% gender representation isn't possible because our society is a matriarchal one, and many women aren't seeking to rise to the top of the career food chain because of the sacrifice that entails.

There are many women who don't want to work at the expense of mothering. Lisa is adamant that the role of mothering is as important as any corporate or other job, and combining mothering with work is not for everyone. For the mother who wants a career, rock-solid support from a partner is invaluable and Lisa is consistently grateful for her partner's flexibility and hands-on contribution to their household and family.

To the young woman embarking on an agribusiness career, Lisa says: "You need to show that you're serious. Your employers need to know that this job isn't just a fill-in until something better comes up, and that you actually want to pursue a career."

It's also important to be flexible, she says. Many agribusiness roles mean moving, sometimes to live in less desirable areas. This can be difficult, especially if you're in a relationship, but staying in one place may mean missing out on career opportunities. While companies accommodate things like maternity leave, they can't be expected to compromise on issues like the right person for the right job in the right place. You have to make your choice, and it's important that you make the one that's right for you. "For me," says Lisa, "it's all about satisfaction at an individual level."

Find out more:

www.merinocompany.com



Juleigh Robins

Juleigh Robins, managing director of Robins Foods Pty Ltd, has been at the forefront of the Australian food arena for more than 30 years. This, however, is not where she began. Reading economics and politics at Monash University, Juleigh says she would have laughed if someone had told her she'd end up doing what she does, "I couldn't even boil an egg back then!" Like many students, she got a part-time restaurant job. There she met her husband-to-be, Ian, who was a chef. That marked the dawn of Juleigh's career in restaurants, catering businesses and food manufacturing. She authored *Wild Classics*, *Wild Lime* and, most recently, *Wild Food*, which won 2009's Best Cookbook for Food Professionals (Australian heat) in the Gourmand World Cookbook awards.

Since its 1986 inception, the Australian native food industry has benefited from the Robins' commitment. They established Robins Foods in 1997 with a mission to mainstream Indigenous foods. In 2000, Robins Foods, together with individual suppliers, established Indigenous Australian Foods Ltd, a not-for-profit organisation, in a bid to cement relations with Indigenous suppliers. From this grew

