IDFA
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NextGen Leadership Program Spotlight: Program Alumni and IDFA Board Members

The International Dairy Foods Association's NextGen Leadership Program is building the next generation of dairy leaders. Designed for emerging leaders ready to advance their careers, the program brings together professionals from across the dairy value chain to strengthen leadership skills, expand networks, and deepen their engagement in industry advocacy. Through this experience, participants gain the skills and perspective to lead within their organizations and across the broader dairy community.
That impact is already visible at the highest levels of the industry. We spoke with three alumni who have gone on to serve on the IDFA board and are helping shape the future of dairy. In the following blog, they share how the program influenced their leadership journeys, the value of the connections they built, and how NextGen prepared them for leading at the next level.

Doug Martin – Cohort 5 Alumni

Doug Martin is General Counsel, Vice President of Compliance for Blue Bell Creameries, where he serves as the company's chief legal, compliance, and governance officer, overseeing five departments focused on protecting the business, its products, and its people. He advises the board of directors and executive leadership on legal, risk, regulatory, and governance matters and manages board and shareholder records. Previously, Doug worked in the Investigations, White Collar, and Fraud group at Hogan Lovells in Washington, D.C., leading global teams on complex legal issues including FCPA, trade regulation compliance, consumer protection, pharmaceutical regulation, higher education, and more. He also serves as a Major in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, with more than 14 years of active and reserve service in roles including judge advocate and civil affairs officer, and currently advises at the Pentagon on legal and policy matters. Doug holds degrees from Texas A&M University, New York University School of Law, and the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, and lives in The Woodlands, Texas, with his wife and two children.

How did participating in the NextGen Leadership Program shape your career and leadership journey, and how has your career progressed since completing the cohort?

Participating in the NextGen program was a real value add to my career trajectory. I've always strongly felt that leadership as a study was important. But getting the type of leadership, say, that connection program offered was a new approach.
Since I finished the program, I've taken the things that I learned from that and tried to impart some of that to the people that I lead with in my own organization. And also, some of my peers as well, incorporate those lessons and attributes. And best practices in my day-to-day work.

What has it been like to grow within your role as a member of the NextGen Cohort to now being a member of the IDFA Board?

Witnessing the work of the board in person for the first time was really eye-opening, learning the different complexities within the industry and the different sectors of the industry that I really didn't have that exposure to was really valuable. Moving from being a spectator to a participant was really rewarding. But also, it created this feeling of responsibility because now I actually can shape the decision-making within our industry. And I would not have felt as comfortable doing that without the context provided by the NextGen program.

What has it been like showing up to board meetings as a NextGen member and already knowing others through the program, and how has that shaped your experience in that environment?

I think it's important as a board member to actively participate. Not just in the voting, but also in the deliberation discussion. And when you've built credibility with people by getting to know them through the NextGen program, it builds confidence because you've learned about other people's companies, other people's sectors. It enables you to talk more intelligently and be a better participant. Fortunately, the NextGen program gives you that basis and allows you to be a positive participant in the board program.

How has your involvement with NextGen shaped your engagement in the broader dairy industry?

Learning about other segments and what those segments are was the foundation. But also learning how the issues that are important to my segment of the industry, as well as our company, are also important to other segments, other companies, was really enlightening. And I think it was helpful getting to know those folks, getting to know their backgrounds, their segments of the industry, their companies, and seeing where our interests aligned. Because that's the whole purpose of being in an industry trade group, is seeing how we can work together on common problems. And I would not have had that background information if not for the NextGen program.

What is one leadership lesson you've learned through the NextGen program that you didn't know before, whether from the coursework or through your experience in the network?

Throughout the modules, we've seen a lot of different leadership scenarios, examples from history, good and bad leaders. And I think what it's helped do for me is to understand that

leadership can be somewhat of an innate quality, but even the best leaders have developed over time. And it is a discipline, both worth continuous study and education, as well as something that you can become better at without some inborn quality as a leader.

Looking back, what was your favorite part of the NextGen Leadership Program or being part of the network?

I would say my favorite thing about participating in NextGen is the doors it has opened to opportunities that I wouldn't have otherwise had. Whether it's speaking with Senators and Representatives on the Hill or speaking with industry leaders and working on issues of national importance, the NextGen program really gave me the ability to be a participant in a lot of those things.

And I wouldn't have had that without it. So, it's not one specific thing, but it's the ability to do a lot of different things that the NextGen program provides.

If you were talking to someone just accepted into the NextGen program, what's one piece of advice you'd give them about what to expect?

If I were speaking to someone who had just gotten into the NextGen program, I think the simplest piece of advice I would give them is to be open to learning as much as they can. Learn from other people, learn from the program itself. Learn from your experiences and use the opportunity that you've received to become a better leader and better person.

What can you share about the relationships you develop through the NextGen Leadership Program?

Joining the NextGen program, I was able to make some good friendships and networking connections initially within my cohort. And those have continued. I've also had the opportunity through continued NextGen program events to meet individuals from other cohorts, and I look forward to continuing to participate with them at future events. This program has given me a lot of connections and community within the industry. And that's been invaluable.

Sarah Schmidt – Cohort 4 Alumni

Sarah Schmidt is vice president of marketing for Associated Milk Producers Inc. (AMPI), a dairy cooperative headquartered in New Ulm, Minn. In this role, she shares AMPI's story with a variety of audiences to help grow revenue and foster relationships, and identify and develop new opportunities. She leads the cooperative's marketing, communications, government

relations, and stewardship and sustainability efforts. A summa cum laude graduate of the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities with a degree in animal science, Sarah has received numerous accolades, including the Cooperative Communicators Association's Michael Graznak Award and three National Milk Producers Federation Outstanding Achievement in Communications Awards, and she was honored with the University of Minnesota Gopher Dairy Club's Golden Graduate Award. Sarah and her husband, Kelly, live on a farm near New Ulm where they are raising three daughters. The family enjoys raising and showing beef and dairy heifers, and hogs. They are active in 4-H, FFA and junior livestock associations.

How has participating in the NextGen program shaped your career and leadership journey, and how has your leadership evolved since then?

My participation in the NextGen Leadership Program came at a time in my life, professionally and personally, where I was really hungry for something different, but I really liked my job. I liked the co-op that I worked for, the dairy farmers I worked for, but I wasn't quite ready for that next step in an education, maybe down the MBA pathway, for example. So NextGen came at a really good time for me to grow in professional skills, to grow in my network, to grow in my experiences. And that's really what the program provided for me.
Since that time, I have found that the conclusion of the program was really just the beginning of what it could be. And so becoming more involved in IDFA through service on the Segment Board has been a way for me to get plugged back in to all that IDFA is doing, but then also to reconnect with some of those great people I met during my time with the cohort.

What has the experience been like serving on one of the Segment Boards?

I don't remember exactly when in life, but somebody told me about the rule of thirds. The rule of thirds in photography and design. I like to think of the rule of thirds in life as well.
And so, for me, this was just another piece of that puzzle. NextGen was the first third, serving on a segment board was the second third. And who knows what the next third would be. But it's about taking the connections, the resources, that whole network you first met in the NextGen cohort and building on that.

And so now I look around the room and I better understand who works where, and where they came from. What role they have now as compared to the role I knew they had years ago. So, it's just about layering on that knowledge, experience, and the network along the way.

How has your involvement in NextGen and your role on the board influenced your engagement with and understanding of the broader dairy industry beyond your company?

I grew up on a dairy farm. Dairy cows and forage dairy judging were cornerstones of my life. It's core to who I am, my personal beliefs, and how I love interacting with the industry. It all began on the farm. What NextGen provided for me was this new or expanded view of the manufacturing side of the business.

So the people who are responsible for taking the milk from the farm and turning it into great-tasting dairy products for people to enjoy. Every day, I'm inspired by the hard work and dedication of the dairy farmers. And now also, I have a greater appreciation for all that's involved to make sure we get our products to the consumer in a safe, great-tasting way.

What's one lesson about leadership that you think you've learned since starting the NextGen program?

One leadership lesson that I've learned, and I've seen, is that curiosity exists at all levels. So that same curiosity that you go to school with and then enter a new job with, the senior leaders of billion-dollar companies have it too. They are in that position because they were curious and have maintained that curiosity. They are asking questions, seeking to learn, and seeking to understand. So, remaining curious has been the biggest lesson that I've learned, and that asking a question is not a sign of not understanding. It's a sign of wanting to understand and wanting to learn and grow.

What has been your favorite part of being in the NextGen Leadership Program and this community?

I would love to have a very profound answer for this question, but it is as simple as saying it's the people. The people I met both within my cohort and the IDFA staff, but now also the people I meet who are the colleagues of the people I met and the new NextGen cohort. It is all about the people, the stories that they all have, what they've been through, what they've learned. You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with. And if you do the math, with the NextGen cohort, it's pretty above average.

It's all just been so interesting and exciting and really has made what already was a very comfortable and friendly industry for me, that much more warm, and really solidified my commitment to dairy.

What has the experience been like getting to know the new cohorts?

Somebody once said that you should always hire someone smarter than yourself. And I think we see that happening in the dairy industry, this collective commitment to seek the best and the

brightest, the hardest working, those with the most grit. And every cohort we're seeing that with the expertise these people are bringing to the program, to the industry, to IDFA. So, it's really exciting to see what all of this energy and momentum can do for dairy.

What do you think it says about our industry that leadership across so many companies is focused on developing future leaders?

It's really an extension of the dairy farmers that we all work for on that dairy farm. We are thinking about the next generation. Many dairy farms are five, six, seven, eight generations here in the U.S. And I think that same mindset applies to those in the dairy industry and dairy manufacturing.

Recognizing that it's up to us to train that next generation and ensure that they have all the resources and tools they need to not just stay where we are but think about what we can become. And so, I think that same energy that looks out for the family farm transitioning to the next generation, the dairy industry wants to see our collective manufacturing network advance for what's ahead.

What advice would you give to future cohorts?

If I were to give one piece of advice for a future cohort member, it really is to approach this experience with the understanding that for chunks of the day, this is all I'm going to think about. Everybody in the room comes from a busy job with lots of responsibilities. But if you want to get as much as you can out of the program, set aside those work responsibilities. Maybe you can do so for a long stretch of time, maybe just a couple of hours. But in that time, give it all that you can to soak it all in.

I promise you're going to get far more out of the program with that dedicated, focused engagement and conversation.

Sean Steichen – Cohort 4 Alumni

Sean Steichen is currently the Vice President of Corporate Strategy at Diversified Foods Inc. In this role, Sean works with DFI's Executive Leadership Team to lead and develop the company's strategic business plan. In addition, Sean works with DFI's many industry & key strategic business partners to promote the benefits of Shelf Stable Pantry Fresh Milk as an incremental solution & partner to the dairy industry. Sean also works collaboratively with the DFI Sales team on many of the DFI strategic sales initiatives. Sean joined the DFI team in September 2020 and has spent the last 12+ years working in the dairy industry specializing in fluid dairy space-

HTST, ESL, and Aseptic UHT contract manufacturing sales & partnerships. Sean resides in Minnesota with his wife Stacy, daughter Lily (6), and son Danny (3.5).

How did the NextGen program shape your career and leadership journey, and how has that growth continued since?

The NextGen program has certainly helped reshape my commitment to my leadership journey through Diversified Foods. It allowed me to apply the learnings and opportunities that we went through back to my real-life opportunities, which allowed me to grow and to become the Chief Commercial Officer at Diversified Foods today.

It has reshaped my commitment to leadership development. I think I always knew I wanted to grow and become a better leader, but going through the NextGen program has really allowed me to hone in on those skills and opportunities and commitments. It also allows me the opportunity to apply back internally at work.

Since leaving the program, what aspects of your experience have made a lasting impact?

Since leaving the NextGen program, there are certain opportunities and things that I always fall back on. I think the most basic is really the cohort network that we went through, you know, being focused and fluid, you kind of get kind of singular focused on maybe your own opportunities and challenges.

But as the market and dairy industry as a whole navigates many things, I think using those leadership qualities to look through the cohort and lean on your peers, individuals, to apply it back to whatever circumstance you're going through has been a good opportunity. So, I think using your peers and using those leadership memories and opportunities, you learn through with your peers to fly back has been really helpful.

As part of NextGen, you attended board meetings, and now you're on an IDFA board. What has that journey been like, from your first meeting to where you are today?

Going from the first NextGen programing to the board meeting has been so fortunate. I think going back as a NextGen cohort member at the beginning has really made me feel comfortable becoming a board member and have expectations of what it means or takes or the responsibilities that it requires to do so to be prepared.

I think another way to look at it is that, as you go through IDFA as a board member, you find yourself interacting with NextGen members at different events, and knowing what they went

through, and knowing how many NextGen members are really talented and strong, it allows that networking to really increase much more quickly.

I think being in their position and knowing what it takes and requires has really helped me get to where I am and know what needs to be done to be a board member. But also allow others to get there too.

What has it been like to connect with new NextGen cohorts and share that common experience with people from across the industry?

I think since the dairy industry is so big and broad, and there are so many segments and channels, sometimes people are nervous or uneasy to go outside their network, that is their segment, their circle. So being a NextGen alumni and seeing new and incoming NextGen members is really opportunistic to break down that barrier, to have that conversation, and it's been helped by the networking piece, to drive those learnings and conversations, and help drive through whatever issue exists.

How has NextGen expanded your view of the broader dairy industry?

Being involved in the NextGen program has helped me become more aware of the other challenges and situations that the broader dairy industry has been working through.
You get so focused on what your segment is doing, you're really focused on those specific challenges. But knowing that the other segments are going through similar or different unique challenges that you're going through and working with them and absorbing their insights really helps you be prepared to apply that back to your everyday or opportunity that you work with there.

And so, I think just becoming more well-rounded and more well-versed and really understanding what the total dairy landscape looks like. To be able to put that back to your work has been really, really important.

What's one leadership insight you've gained through NextGen that has stuck with you?

One thing I've learned from going through the NextGen program, from leadership, would really be to surround yourself with a diverse group of resources or people to make informed decisions. And I think that really stems from the NextGen program being a diverse group of colleagues in the cohort model, where not everyone has the same background from sales or finance or manufacturing, or even your own segment.

When you use that same mindset or information, with the NextGen program applied back to your everyday work and making sure you can look at every aspect, every angle of the decision, it allows me to kind of make sure I take that consideration internally every day.

Looking back, what's been the most valuable part of NextGen for you, during the program or through the network afterward?

Looking back, being a part of the NextGen program has been so valuable. To be a part of the cohort model and program and really become everyday friends and partners with those members today. And also having the opportunity to meet the whole leadership staff and the board member group has been an experience that is second to none. To be in the room and be in the conversations with some of these impactful leaders has been opportunistic and one that I really am appreciative of.

What advice would you offer someone beginning their NextGen journey?

If I were just starting the NextGen program, I would say go find somebody who is in a different segment, a different role background than you are, and have a conversation with them first. I think using that mindset really opens you up for success for the next 12 months of the program. Because that's what it's about every day for leadership, right? Being a good leader and considering every aspect. That's what the cohort module will allow you to do.