



Feeding the Future: Leadership in the Food and Agribusiness Industries

How leaders can reach
their ambitious goals
beyond 2030

What always amazes us in our work as leadership advisers to the agriculture and food industries is how, across the value chain, the basic mission and fundamental purpose are always the same: feeding the world.

In 2020, we wrote about [the future of leadership in agribusiness](#) — in particular, how the industry can find and develop successful leaders that can lead it into the future. More than four years later, we wanted to revisit this topic and the critical challenges facing the agriculture and food industries. In short, how can leaders guide their organizations to operating successfully, responsibly and sustainably?

“The challenge to me is not ‘how do you feed the world?’ but ‘how do you feed the world in a better way?’” one leader at prominent agribusinesses told us. “To do that, we need to significantly

change how we think about the industry and the way in which leaders lead. Because if we only look to produce more — to use more land, more fertilizers, more chemical products to produce poor-quality foods that are often creating an overweight population, even while there are still a billion people undernourished — I think we’d all agree that’s not the right way to feed the world.”

In this piece, based on our work with agriculture and food leaders and in more than a dozen interviews with industry executives, we look at three elements of the leadership challenge for ensuring this industry can achieve its mission to feed the world: enhancing technology and innovation; driving collaboration and partnership; and developing the next generation of talent.

Technology and innovation

Innovation has always been central to the story of the agriculture and food industries. Thousands of years ago it was the irrigation techniques that created agriculture — and modern civilization. More recently, mechanization, refrigeration and fertilization have transformed how we grow, transport, preserve and consume food. Meanwhile, climate change and more health-conscious consumers are forcing the agriculture and food industries to consider urgent change. All the while, there's a growing sense that the industry is on the precipice of change as transformative technologies — from AI to automation to precision farming — point to a future full of possibilities.

“I think there's going to be an inflection point, sometime in the next five to six years, where the promise of technology is really going to come to fruition,” said Raviv Zoller, CEO of ICL Group, a chemical manufacturer that produces fertilizers. “A lot of inefficiencies will improve in small increments. But when that happens, the possibilities will arise in much larger increments.”

Technology and innovation are key to the agriculture and food industries' future prospects. For one thing, “feeding the world” remains a singular global challenge on its own; according to estimates by the World Health Organization, roughly 10 percent of the world's population deals with hunger every year, an issue that is top of mind for every leader in this industry.

And yet, the goal is not — and cannot be — simply to produce more food. Any scenario for feeding the world post-2030 involves innovative solutions to sustainable food production, both in terms of limiting agriculture's impact on the environment and ensuring more food.

The interesting twist is that customers are demanding it, both upstream and downstream: Consumers want healthier and more sustainably sourced foods on their plates, and food producers want solutions to help them make more food more efficiently and sustainably. Innovation must keep an eye on these market demands, rather than being based on the hope of altering desires.



You need to lead in a different way, one where you stay in dialogue with the whole value chain. It's about building trust, trust you earn by being consistent and by being part of the dialogue for a very long time and being part of developing the solutions.”

SVEIN TORE HOLSETER
CEO, YARA

“The biggest transformational change I foresee in this industry is the move to what I’d call multidimensional innovation and offerings,” said Robert Berendes, executive partner at Flagship Pioneering, a biotechnology company. “Up to now, companies acted on caloric production, and basically ignored other social or environmental dimensions of food production. We’ve reached our limits on operating like this. However, the glass-half-full logic tells me that technology will help us balance calorie production with sustainability and farmer profitability.”

Collaboration and partnership

Agriculture and food leaders make it clear, however, that feeding the world can’t happen alone. Partnership and collaboration are critical ingredients for the agriculture industry to fulfill its purpose and achieve its goals. Collaboration both within sectors and horizontally across the value chain, from production to consumption, will be key.



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DIEGO CASANELLO
CEO, FARMER’S BUSINESS NETWORK

“A mindset of open innovation, of collaboration, of partnership — that is going to be absolutely critical in the next 30 years,” said Diego Casanello, CEO of the Farmer’s Business Network, an industry technology and commerce platform. “You will need leaders who have proven to be able to form alliances and create win-win relationships with stakeholders, and who know how to build a network.”

Leaders among many groups — agriculture and food companies, consumers and government — need to align on creating the case for change, aligning goals and incentives, and storytelling. Agriculture and food leaders may need to look beyond their industry boundaries to partner in improving efficiency and to meet goals.

“In the olden days you could sort of build the really good R&D shop, invent technology and bring it to the marketplace,” said Chuck Magro, CEO of Corteva Agriscience. “That’s still a pathway for growth, but now no company today can do all of that invention alone. Looking at getting partners involved both inside and outside is critical. ... We’re partnering with the life science industry because the science is often the same.”

Alzbeta Klein, CEO of the International Fertilizer Association, pointed to how she has challenged many of that sector’s leaders to look to other industries, such as metals and mining, for partners and stakeholders in taking fertilizer innovation to the next level.

“As a leader, you will need to attract different types of partnerships within your ecosystem,” Klein said. “Your tier-one partnerships may look different today from what they were in the past. But with clarity on your mission and vision, you will achieve greater things through engaging and refreshing your ecosystem regularly.”



I'm pushing our organization to recognize that technology is going to change our company. It's going to change how our business gets done. It's going to change what our customers expect from us. We may not know exactly how it will change, but all you have to do to understand is look at the magnitude of past technology advancements."

PAUL MAASS
CEO, SCOULAR

Inspiring the next generation of talent

This broader view of the nature of innovation, partnership and collaboration bleeds over to the final fundamental leadership challenge in feeding the world: developing the next generation of leaders.

Agriculture, perhaps better than any other industry in the world, has the perfect story to tell, one where progress can truly mean making the world a better place. It's up to leaders across the supply chain to communicate that story to a young generation of employees entering the job market in search of meaningful work.

"The next generation of leaders is what gives me the greatest hope for our ability to sustainably nourish the future," said Brian Sikes, CEO of the multinational food giant Cargill. "They understand the urgency of the challenges the world is facing, care deeply about dedicating their careers to a purpose bigger than themselves and see agriculture as a critical part of the solution to many of the most pressing issues facing people and the planet."

Tactically speaking, talent that is beyond the traditional scope will be needed to boost the agriculture and food sectors. For example, one interviewee said that he believed that the industry needs to start looking outside of its traditional rural borders for future talent; while someone may not have grown up on a farm, they may find a passion in feeding the world and can learn through experience and training.

Overall, finding and developing forward-looking leaders with a problem-solving mindset will be key.



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BRIAN SIKES
CEO, CARGILL

“Finding folks with sets of experiences, who have had the opportunity to broaden their perspectives, is ultimately going to be more valuable than anything,” said Tony Will, CEO of CF Industries, a fertilizer manufacturer. “The problem we’re going to want to solve in the future will be different. So you want to find people who can approach problems with a solution mindset, no matter what the case.”



For all the challenges, the agriculture and food leaders we speak with offer a remarkable sense of optimism about their ability to feed the world.

“I think food has never been as plentiful or as affordable relative to incomes as it is today,” one agribusiness leader told us. “The food system is more efficient than it’s ever been. And I think there’s huge potential to do even a lot better.”

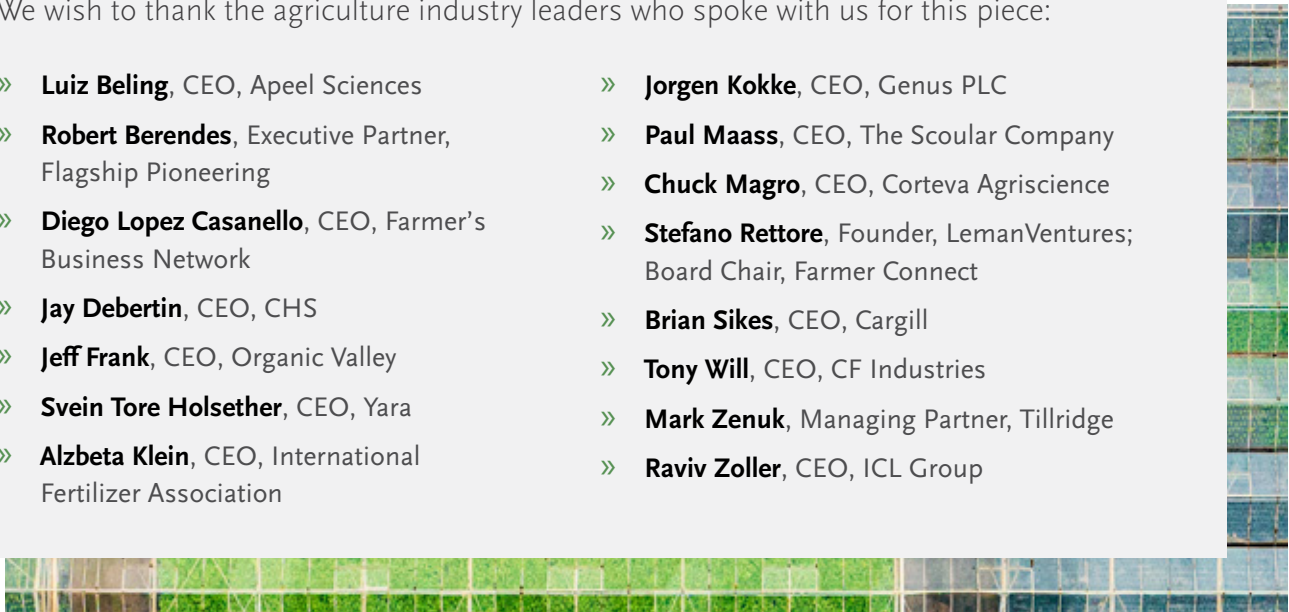
Indeed, agriculture is humanity’s “first industry,” as one interviewee put it. Almost everyone we talked to is optimistic about the industry’s future capacity to transform in the face of immense challenges behind inspirational leadership.

The key, however, is in the talent: finding leaders eager to take on the challenge of feeding the world, and do what it takes to do better — someone who can bring together farmers, consumers and the companies that connect those two groups in solving the most critical issues.

The agriculture and food industries have met these challenges before — and can meet them in the future, with the right focus on driving innovation, embracing partnership and cultivating talent.

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