

MEN IN MOTION

## The changing context of leadership



Head down and always in perpetual motion, Tom Heeman is a study in leadership. His humility and team approach are on full view on a sunny June morning near Thorndale, Ontario. That's where he's field manager for seasonal workers who harvest 40 acres of traditional June and day-neutral strawberries for the family business, Heeman Greenhouses and Strawberry Farm. Photos by [REDACTED]

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Not yet 30, Tom Heeman is a man on a mission. He's president of the Berry Growers of Ontario while fulfilling the same role for the North American Strawberry Growers (NASGA). How does he do it? And why?

"We need to be on the global stage to be in the game," claims Heeman, field and strategic projects manager for the family business, Heeman's Berries. "That's actually common for a lot of horticultural crops."

Heeman's perspective comes from a family background where the day has no boundaries between life and business.

Pleasure is business. Life is passion for business.

### Absorbing family values

As he was growing up near Thorndale, Ontario, it was quite common to discuss the strawberry and greenhouse operation with his parents

Rudy and Florence at the supper table along with siblings Will, Katie and Bridget. His father Rudy was president of NASGA in 2005/2006. Most memorable were the holidays tacked on to business trips to California, Florida and North Carolina.

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COVER STORY

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It's not yet 8 am but Tom Heeman (R) and his older brother Will are loading freshly picked strawberries into bread racks. Both are graduates of the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program.

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Right now, he's figuring out how to adopt some of the growing techniques that he observed in the Netherlands and Belgium on a November 2018 tour organized by NASGA.

"This organization (NASGA) has helped us put our best foot forward in terms of production technology," says Heeman, referring to the home farm. "We now produce more berries per acre on 20 acres of day-neutrals, than our 20 acres of fruiting June strawberries. In Ontario, we are early adopters of technology – we're not always cutting edge, but when systems are validated, we are able to ramp up quickly."

It was tough to get away from the farm for the international trip. But time management is one of Heeman's strong suits. Whatever he pledges to do is a laser-cut building block. Consider his timeline. After high school, he chose an unconventional track pursuing the International Development Stream at the University of Guelph. He earned a Bachelor of Arts Honours degree with a minor in agricultural sciences. Graduating in 2014, he had already completed field studies in Brazil, Costa Rica and Haiti.

Interspersed with these courses were many trips to the United States for in-field exploring. As Heeman shares, it was an important base for understanding the value chain. "It may seem simple, but it's complicated in reality," says Heeman.

Out of all these experiences, Heeman has distilled a perspective that's resonating with his peers.

"You need to have some humility in order to make improvements in your life," says Heeman. "Let others give you a frank assessment. And above all, recognize that you need

partnerships to leverage your skills and take you to the next level. You can't be all places at one time. It's of mutual value to grow the pie."

Some of his philosophy also evolved out of his participation in Class 16 of the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program (AALP). Since 1984, the Rural Ontario Institute has graduated 475 agricultural leaders in an intense 18-month executive leadership program. Cut to its essentials, the program offers eight seminars across Ontario, lasting from two to four days. One is always held in Ottawa. A two-week North American study tour is a highlight, but the much-anticipated trip is a two-week international tour. Destinations change with each class.

### Learning listening skills

Gabrielle Ferguson has been leadership programs director, Rural Ontario Institute, since September 2018. She is currently on a listening tour across Ontario to ferret out the future of the AALP, an enduring program in the psyche of Ontario agriculture. The program deserves celebrating for its consistency and renewal in generating high-calibre leaders who have gone on to business, community and industry success.

"One of the important questions to ask is: who am I and how do I dovetail into the people around me," she says. "Self-awareness and self-discovery are important elements of leadership."

This is a central concept of emotional intelligence (EQ) which is the ability to recognize, understand and manage our own emotions. To excel, it's the ability to influence the emotions of others.

"The program's strength is its diverse leaders meeting and talking together," she says. "The participants range from

farmers to bankers to media to lawyers to ag retailers. And sometimes people wear multiple hats. As diverse as they are, they all have connections to agriculture and rural communities."

It's no accident that good leaders are good listeners. Taking time to breathe and listening are a skill set difficult to develop and maintain, especially in an era of multi-channel communication. The speed of social media, along with 24/7 news channels, reduce complex issues into sound bites. These disruptors trigger emotion-based responses. Quite often, these responses are defensive and not tuned in to audience needs.



Too often, farmers are responding from a position of defensiveness and conflict, says Ferguson. It's a result of not listening to or understanding the audience. Instead, she counsels a position of listening to the needs whether that's a consumer's hunger for convenience, health or saving the planet. More often than not, there is common ground in working together on those needs.

One of the AALP graduates, Henriët DeBruin, has worked on those skills and built a vegetable greenhouse business with her husband at Slate River, Ontario. Describing herself as a connector, she walks the talk in terms of involvement within the Ontario Federation of Agriculture as well as the Thunder Bay and Area Food Strategy.

"The rural-urban divide is

challenging," she says. "People are quick to complain but not to take action. I don't have all the answers, but the first thing is to build a trust relationship. It's difficult to do any leadership without trust, commitment and time."

### Tapping a network

"You need to be authentic," says Ferguson. Ask yourself what you believe in. When you understand yourself and experiences, then you understand how you came to have your beliefs."

With those core beliefs, leaders such as Tom Heeman are acting in different ways. They are not necessarily doing all the talking. In fact, their strengths are in listening and connecting a diverse group of players to get the job done.