



FCC Knowledge Podcast – Episode: Lori Robinson People Power: Learning through mentorship and collaboration

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Interviewer: Marty Seymour (MS)

Guest: Lori Robinson (LR)

MS: From AgExpert, it's the FCC Knowledge Podcast, a show that features real Canadian producers, real stories, and real good conversations about the business of farming. I'm your host, Marty Seymour.

LR: What my dad would say to me would be that you don't get respect by being, but you get respect by doing. That no job is too small, no matter what your position is in a company.

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N: Today on the show, we're heading out East to the Maritimes to chat with Lori Robinson. Lori is a sixth-generation farmer and is a farm manager for Eric C. Robinson Inc. She manages soybean, grain, and forages production for the farm in Prince Edward Island. Lori took over the farm at a very young age and stepped into a leadership role sooner in life than she expected. But since that time, she's done a lot of great work in agriculture as both a business owner and a board member. Lori was also the first recipient of the Government of Canada's Women Entrepreneurship Fund. She's going to tell our host Marty all about her inspiring journey as a successful leader in agriculture. Don't go anywhere. This is going to be a good one.

MS: So, today on the show we've got Lori with us. Now, Lori, you are from PEI. I've never been there, so help me understand where you get your mail.

LR: Where I get my mail?

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MS: Yes, where are you from?

LR: I thought you might have been asking me where the local post office was, so ...

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MS: Well, I kind of am, yeah.

LR: Ironically, the post office is in rural PEI in Albany, and that actually is where our main offices are, and all of our farm buildings. So, Albany, Prince Edward Island, seven kilometres from the base of the Confederation Bridge.

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MS: Seven kilometres from the Confederation Bridge. So, you're helping me a ton. I've never been to the Island. I have a perception that everyone in the Island rode the school bus together. Because it seems like a pretty small town, and everybody seems to know everybody. Is this the case?

LR: Well, we don't know everybody, but definitely being in the farming community I tend to know lots of people from tip to tip, or from shore to shore. But no, it's Canada's most densely populated province. So, we're small in geography, lots of people, but no, we don't all know each other.

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MS: With a name like Lori Robinson, I was reminded there's got to be more Robinson families on the Island. And I was reminded of, I think one time I mentioned the name McIntosh or something, and someone said, which line of McIntosh, because there's six or seven grandfathers and they all had their respective families. So, are there are lot of Robinsons?

LR: There's not, actually. And within my own Robinson family, it's a fairly small family. I'm a sixth-generation farmer, and coming down the line, my grandfather, who the company is named after, he had two sons and they each had three kids. So, we're a fairly small group of Robinsons. There's a couple of other clusters of Robinsons on PEI that we're not closely related to.

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MS: Everyone who comes on our podcast, I like to ask this same question because we have farmers listening, and I always think farmers love to know the price of land. So, how is land valued at Prince Edward Island?

LR: There's great demand for agricultural land on PEI, and so probably more recently, some of the land, especially in central PEI where I'm located, would trade probably upwards of \$6,000 an acre. And as you go out to the extremities to the east and the west, it may be \$1,000 an acre less than that, which is double what it was when I started my career in the mid '90s.

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MS: This is how naïve I am, I would just think, okay, that's potato land. But what else do we grow on that soil. The \$6,000 math obviously is working for somebody. What are you growing?

LR: We have potatoes, followed by soybeans, and then we have a barley crop, and the barley crop is under-seeded with a forage crop. A typical rotation in PEI traditionally has been three-year. Potatoes, barley, or a wheat crop, and then a forage, a rye, something like that. But now we're starting to see other crops creep into the rotations. There's quite an uptake in corn acres, there's some canola, and then there's some other oilseed crops that other people are trying, and some peas. So, over the years, we've certainly seen an increase in the number of crop types that are being grown in rotations on PEI.

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MS: Is that a disease management strategy or the economics of the crop? What would drive an expansion in the rotations?

LR: The really big driver here was the government has a legislated three-year crop rotation rule, and so you cannot grow a row crop any more than one in three years. So, that forced the big change in the way potato farmers looked at the rotation on PEI.

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N: For those of you listening in from parts of the country outside of PEI, many of you may be utilizing crop rotations for disease management purposes. In PEI, there is legislation called the Agricultural Crop Rotation Act that dictates your crop rotation. Within that Agricultural Crop Rotation Act itself, the law states its purpose is to maintain and improve the quality of the soil, surface and groundwater, and to preserve soil productivity. One could conclude this speaks to sustainability in motion on the Island.

MS: I think our listeners should hear about your farm. Tell us about, I think you called it the Robinson Farm. Describe your enterprise for us.

LR: My grandfather, Eric Robinson, who the company is named after, he took his father's 100-acre farm and he expanded it into sort of what our farm looks like today. We have a 2,200-acre farm, basically all within about a 12-kilometre radius of our main farm buildings and our storage building. And so, we have expanded our rotations to now, like I say, include our four crops, mainly potatoes, soybeans, barley, forages. Up until three years ago, we were heavily involved in the potato industry, both in the growing, and the packing, and the marketing of potatoes. And then the family decided to make a decision to discontinue our potato operation, but we still rent our land out to potato growers and carry on the same rotation.

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MS: Let me make sure I've got this straight. I think 2,200 acres in your part of Canada seems like a fairly sizeable operation. If a third of your farm is in potatoes, I'm assuming you rent those out, or contract those to other growers so that they can take advantage of growing the potatoes? You've just exited that yourself.

LR: Yes. So, 25%. With the four crops, 25% of our land is in potatoes. We average 550 acres of each of those four crops in any given year during the rotation. We do all of the land prep and then we lease the land out to a potato grower.

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MS: So, most of the business relationship, then, is whole farm. Do you see a lot of contract acres in potatoes only in operations, where I just only rent those acres? Or do the rental arrangements always include whole farm?

LR: Most of the rental arrangements would just be in the potato year. But we do rent a little bit of land in, to our own farm, that we grow crops on. And so, we pay \$100.00 to \$150.00 an acre every year that we rent those fields, regardless of the crop. So, we have some 30-year rental agreements with some of our neighbours.

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N: Just to recap here, Lori's farm has pivoted from growing potatoes to now renting out land to potato growers. To add to that, the Robinson farm rents land from neighbours for their own crops. It's a fairly unique business strategy. So, naturally, the next question you might be wondering is, what was the strategic thought process behind shifting their business focus? What drove that decision? Let's let Lori explain.

LR: We have a board of directors that includes all of the owners, my generation of Robinsons. And I think the biggest driving force was our succession plan and that we didn't necessarily see someone coming behind me that was interested in primary agriculture and production. We sat down as a family and decided that going forward we had other business partners that were interested in buying out our packaging plant for packing and sorting and grading potatoes, and those would be the same people that would rent quite a bit of our land. So, we saw an opportunity to shift focus and make it maybe more enticing for a member of the next generation of our own family to maybe consider agriculture as a career. We haven't found that person yet, and I still have a ways to go before I'm ready to retire, so we're working on that premise that it's an owner-operated farm.

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MS: I think I want to finish this little chat here on risk management. Because you have an interesting history of how you got into farming. And if I understand, the loss of your dad came, well, it was obviously unexpected, but early, and that sort of set you up as far as starting into agriculture. So, maybe you can just help me understand how that played out,

for our listeners who don't know your story. And then I want to ask a little bit more about how you manage risk in all these decisions, all the way along through your years of farming.

LR: Growing up in my family, my father was the farmer, and his brother ran the businesses. My brother, Andrew, was highly expected to probably take over the family farm. And when we were in our mid-teens, Andrew announced that he was not interested in being a farmer. Probably something I had never strongly considered because I didn't feel that was a choice for me. That was what he was going to do, and I would go off to do something else. Giving it some thought and knowing that I had always followed my father around like a lost little puppy dog, wanting to be everywhere he was, that I actually had a real interest in growing crops and the science behind it. And so, I had announced to my family, and my father mainly, that that's what I wanted to do, and that I was prepared to go off to university and study agriculture, and to return back to the family farm. After I'd spent a couple of years working in the industry, I went to the University of Guelph, and then I worked at the University of Guelph for a couple years, and then I returned home at the start of 1994, basically to learn the ropes from my dad. I was 25. And unfortunately, that spring just as we were beginning our potato planting, he was killed in a car accident. So, it was a pretty big shock for all of us. And he was only 48, and I was young. And anyhow, thankfully he had lots of great people that worked for my family and in the business, that basically, they became my mentors and they taught me everything that I know. And so, through lots of years of working with them, I gradually made my way into being the farm manager and overseeing the farm now. And this will be my 29th crop coming up this year.

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N: I think you hear this story a lot in farming that someone who was expected to take over the family farm decides not to, leaving an opportunity open for someone else to fill the gap. Lori decided to be a bit of a trailblazer as, at that time, there weren't a lot of women in leadership roles in agriculture. Unfortunately, when her father passed away, she was thrust into being a farm manager sooner than she expected. Let's hear what that experience was like, being a young woman in the '80s and leading an ag business.

LR: Thankfully, my family never really discouraged me from going into agriculture. As a female, when I made this announcement, it was in the mid-'80s. There wasn't really any other role models for me to look at to say, well, I want to be like that person, they're running their own farm. And everybody in the farming community knew that I had intentions to come home and start running the family farm and join my dad in the business. And anyhow, obviously I got into farm management much sooner. Still no real role models, but a lot of my dad's friends or peers in the industry were more than happy to take me under their wing. And so, here on PEI it wasn't strange for me to be a female farmer. I did hit some snags obviously when I would deal with some equipment dealers, some grain buyers, or merchandisers. Things like that where people expected to come into our office building, ask for the farm manager, and expect to see a male walk down the hallway to greet them. Yeah, I had a very unfortunate incident with a grain

merchandiser who came to see the farm manager, walked down the hall, he looked me up and down. And anyway, then he talked on about what crops we might be able to sell him. And at the end of it, he said, I really had showed up here today to speak with Mr. Robinson. And I responded with, I'm the Mr. Robinson that you're looking for. And I said, and I really don't think we'll be able to do any business going forward. And that's exactly what happened.

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MS: There are people listening right now that are going, way to go. The world I operate in today, that's just so foreign that people would treat you in such a manner. But I think you also have to throw yourself back in time to say, that was conventional thinking for some people, that just weren't thinking, honestly. And the way you handled it just sounds so classy. What a great story.

LR: It wasn't that uncommon that you would meet with a female, either a farm manager, or a farm-her, sometimes as we say, and they would be the ones making the decisions anyway. And my crew was very supportive, all of our staff. I still have a lot of the same staff that I started with. And it really never came across as they were ever uncomfortable with the idea that they had a female boss in a male-dominated industry. So, I've obviously surrounded myself with some very good people through my career that have certainly made some of those less-than-ideal situations bearable. They've always got my back.

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MS: It's a fun story to share in hindsight, to think about fast-forward 25 years about where you've come. And there's got to be some people that have walked into the office that were just outstanding mentors or supportive of what you're doing too, from that supplier community. Who stands out for you in that?

LR: Yeah. For me, really, the staff that was on hand for over 50 years, started with my grandfather, then my father, and then worked for me. And so, what I found as my biggest supporters, my biggest mentors, the people that taught me the most, were the staff. That all of a sudden, I had 20 people that worked for me, and they were looking to me to make all the decisions. And so, I made it more a collaborative approach where we made decisions together.

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MS: Actually, as you're talking, farming in many ways is the most simple, complicated business I can think of. We grow stuff and we sell it. And to your point, we all come home from school, and we're going to take over the farm, and we've got this figured out, and realize there's a whole lot more going on here than what they taught me in school.

LR: I have a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture. I majored in Agricultural Business. And people say, well, how do you apply your university degree? And I do say, it's taught me to problem solve, and to think critically, and to deal with people, and numbers. But the actual getting down in the dirt and growing crops, I had hoped to learn that from my father, and instead I learned that from what was once my father's staff, my grandfather's staff, and then became my staff. I had to learn everything from them, and thankfully they were all here and very helpful in my very steep, very steep learning curve.

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MS: What's the one thing that, if you look back on those early days and the steep learning curve, what's the one you wish that you were taught in school that you could have brought home with you?

LR: Problem solving and learning to take in multiple factors to analyze risks and make decisions that are very, very critical, but making sure that you have all the information to be able to make the right decision. And when you don't make the right decision, how you're going to make it right the next time. I did take a couple of environmental studies courses at university that really were quite eye opening, and I think that helped us help further my family's plans to be caretakers of the soil, as well as trying to find the balance between economic and environmental sustainability.

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N: After the break, Lori is going to share her experiences as a board member and will provide some valuable advice for women getting into ag, and anyone looking to join a board. Don't go anywhere.

LR: If you don't see the mentor you're looking for, become the mentor for someone else.

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N: Well, let's pick up where we left off. Lori was telling us all about her transition into becoming a farm manager and taking over the family farm when she was a young woman. She was thrust into this position after the sudden passing of her father, so there was a very steep learning curve. Thankfully, her father's staff were very supportive, and she was surrounded by a lot of really great people who helped make the transition much smoother. Clearly, she learned a lot of valuable lessons through this experience and received some fantastic mentoring from those around her. Naturally then, Lori decided to give back to the ag community by taking on several board-member positions over the years.

MS: Okay, I want to change gears here a little bit because I also understand you're a bit of a mover and shaker when it comes to sitting on boards. Just tell us what that looks like.

LR: I have sat and continue to sit on the board of another business that we're a part owner in with several other potato farmers in the area. It's a wash plant for potatoes at Mid Isle Farms. I sat on the PEI crop insurance board. I started, in '05 when they reached out to see if I wanted to be on the board, I saw it actually more as an opportunity for me to learn how to properly buy my own crop insurance. And by the end of it, 11 years later, I had sat as the chair of the board and spent quite a bit of time with the manager, promoting the business, and travelling to reinsurance conferences, things like that. So, I really got to have a real appreciation for not just the crops I was growing, but the other facets of agriculture on PEI that I didn't know much about.

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MS: I watch lots of young people unsure of how to participate in a board, even why. And I wonder if you had some perspective on, what could you tell me if I was my 30-year-old self, that would make me want to put my energy out into board work?

LR: For me, I looked at it as a learning opportunity about something I didn't necessarily ... I knew I bought crop insurance and was advised by our agent what types of insurance we should buy. But I always felt like I didn't know enough about the program, and I was spending quite a bit of money to be a part of it. And so, I looked at that as a learning opportunity for myself.

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MS: What about this idea of, I'm too busy at home to go and spend time at a board meeting, and how do you advise people to reconcile that?

LR: If you're too busy, then I think you say, well maybe I'll join that board in a few years, or when I feel like I have more time. Or for me, I have an amazing assistant farm manager who, on the days that I would spend at meetings, when we were packing potatoes, he would run the line. And so, again, it goes back to surrounding yourself with good people that if you needed to be away from work, that you tend to rely on the people around you to pick up the slack, as it were, but only if it's something that you really want to do.

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MS: And to your point, in this industry, the farm-anchored boards, they know the farming cycles. And so, for someone listening who wasn't sure where to start, is with the commodity group is a great place because they'll allow time away for harvest and seeding because everybody else has to do it too.

LR: In today's day, with the potential to do virtual meetings, then there's not also that time commitment to get there and get back if you're a long distance away from where your meetings are often held. I would say, well, how often do you meet? How long are the meetings? What is the time commitment? Because I only have this much time to allot to that project at this particular time. Maybe it's something I'll do in the future if I have more free time. And maybe I just don't feel that I will have, but those are key questions that I would ask.

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N: Lori provides some good insight into why and when you might want to join a board. The reality is that any board position is an additional time commitment, and you have to evaluate whether or not it's something that really works for you in your business. Everything from when the meeting takes place, to how you might contribute to the meetings, should be taken into consideration before signing on. Interestingly enough, that theme of surrounding yourself with good people comes up again. It can be easier to make time for a board member position if you have good people around you to take care of your business when you need time away from it.

MS: Do you have any advice for the intimidation of, I'm a young person and I want to participate? Do you have any coaching for them? Because I watch this with a lot of our agriculture boards are people fairly senior that would have a lot of respect and I want to crack into that. What advice do you have for me?

LR: It's funny. We had this discussion the other day. As I said, I'm a fairly new member on the Farmers Helping Farmers and I was talking to somebody about a steep learning curve of all of the work that they've done, and all of their upcoming plans. And I found I would allot myself probably a 12-month window, not to say a whole lot, but to gather as much information as I can. Don't expect to know everything when you sit in there, and nobody will expect you to know everything either.

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MS: I think the by-product is the amount of learning that you get. There's one thing to show up and contribute. The other side of, think of how much you learned out of the crop insurance board you were on that you could apply to your business. It's like going to school without having to pay tuition. Your tuition is your time.

LR: Yeah. I expect that on occasion you might get a little bit monetarily for your attendance at some of these meetings. But I suspect that over the 11 years I was there and the years since, that I've probably bought crop insurance as smartly as I could have. And I've probably saved myself dollars along the way because I got that education.

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N: Lori shares some great advice for future board members listening to the podcast. If you're just starting to join boards and want to learn how to do well on them, stick around and absorb the knowledge and experience of long-time board members like Lori. Those who came before you typically have a lot of valuable wisdom to share, and the benefit here is that you will probably learn some things you can apply to your ag business in the process. So, there's another role where Lori has found herself in a mentorship position, and she's picked up some transferable skills while doing it. She's taking part in a popular Canadian pastime. Let's let her elaborate.

LR: I'm also a Level 2 competitive curling coach. And I've spent a good part of, not in the last couple of years since the pandemic, but the three years before that I coached a junior men's curling team and we went to a couple of nationals and a Canada Games in Red Deer. And so, like you say, it's important to have interests outside of agriculture as well. I'm a former competitive curler myself. I've played at six nationals. So, again, it reminds me of being a little bit of a mentor to become a coach, to when I could no longer play, I wanted to give back to a sport that I loved. And so, I took up coaching, and it's very much like being a mentor in agriculture.

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MS: Oh yeah, that's super good, and so many transferable skills too. Maybe you might have looked at it as a way to do something else in the community or fill your bucket non-farming. But man, there's a lot of lessons you would have brought back home with curling alone.

LR: In lots of small communities, obviously you don't live in the city, so it's difficult to find certified coaches that have gone through the troubles, I guess, to get certified under the national coaching program. And so, to be able to give back into some of these smaller communities that I live in. And again, I'll talk about passion, to be passionately coaching a team for a sport that I absolutely love and continue to follow. So, I had to find time to fit that into my schedule as well. And when I could no longer fit it into my schedule, I had to give it up, but I have spent several years coaching after my competitive career was over. Trivia question, though, so I actually curled against Jennifer Jones in the very first Scotties game that she ever played in, 2002 in Brandon. On an outside sheet, in Manitoba, with 6,000 people cheering against us.

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MS: Outside?

LR: Yeah. That was her first game at a Scotties ever.

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MS: Oh, wow. And what was the final score?

LR: We lost. I'm going to say it was, like, 8-5, but I have no idea.

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MS: But there was probably a judging error in the fourth end or something that would have been the difference.

LR: No doubt.

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MS: Kind of bringing ourselves to the last few questions I like to ask everybody. And just to have such good statesperson wisdom here you're offering, Lori. I want to know, if you went back to your younger self, what advice would you give yourself?

LR: What my dad would say to me would be that you don't get respect by being, but you get respect by doing. That no job is too small, no matter what your position is in a company. And so, some days you roll in and you feel like the boss. And in my early stages of my career, some days, because you see your name on the company and you think that you know everything. But yeah, you don't know everything, and it takes an entire team to make things successful.

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MS: I was kind of reminded of, I've got a couple of teenage kids and I won't throw them under the bus on this, but reflecting on me, I'm like, I actually was my smartest when I was a teenager. I have been progressively less smart as I've gotten older, realizing how little I know, and how much more I want to learn. And so, I think what I heard from you is this humility in our early years to recognize that and to be open to learning.

LR: That, as well as I loved going to university, I enjoyed the University of Guelph, and I wish that I would have taken different courses as my electives along the way, knowing what my career path was going to look like. I hate to say it, but I wish I had learned more and taken the opportunity while I was there to learn more and not take the odd easier path to getting a good mark, but actually educated myself a little bit more. But thankfully I've had lots of opportunity to learn along the way. And so, therefore, as I said, a day without learning is a bit wasted in my book. So, I strive to learn more as we go along.

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MS: I have another question for you. Do you have advice for young women starting out in our industry, whether they're on the supplier side, whether they're farming, what advice do you have?

LR: I used to have quite a few articles, reporters, or magazine articles, they would come out and they would always want to interview me. And I suppose mainly because I was one

of very few female potato farmers in PEI, we're sort of the king of the potatoes. And one day, they kept harping on the idea that I was a girl farmer. And I asked them not to point out my gender in the article. That I really didn't want to be known as that girl farmer, which could be another great book for my autobiography if I ever get around to writing it. But the magazine article writer said to me, Lori, don't forget that you could be a role model for young girls that want to be coming up through the industry and don't think there's a place for them in agriculture. And it really turned things around for me in realizing that I really didn't have any female mentors when I decided to become a farmer. So, I would often say, if you don't see the mentor you're looking for, become the mentor for someone else. So, I kind of took that on as my badge of honour to say that I wanted to make sure that I was visible enough as a female farmer that other people wondering if that was a possible career choice for them, that they could reach out and see women farming and realize that it is quite possible, a career option.

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MS: I think you should make that Chapter 7 in your book, about become the mentor. And so, if you need content, look back on this podcast at a later date. Think, oh man, I've got two chapters of my book covered already in this one little visit here we had today.

LR: That's right. I'll slide them in somewhere, for sure. I did say, I have a couple of different titles that I would work on. And one is, You're That Girl Farmer, or I'm the Mr. Robinson That You're Looking For. So, I'll definitely need a chapter in about mentoring and becoming the mentor that I never saw.

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MS: Well, it was a pleasure chatting with you today, Lori. I had a lot of fun. This was really fun.

N: I don't know about you folks listening in, but I thought Lori's story was super inspiring and encouraging. Lori is a wonderful mentor who has done a lot of great work for the ag industry and her community as a whole. She shared a lot of great info that we can take and apply to our own career journey, like the following. 1) Surround yourself with great people. Lori emphasized again and again how the people around her really contribute to her success. She suggested that her staff at the farm are all vital to the functioning of the farm, and she knows she can count on them to fill in as needed. Lori has also had a lot of great mentors throughout the years, both as a board member and as a farmer. Her advice is to absorb as much learning as you can from the people around you. I'm pretty confident that Lori is a good mentor herself, in large part because of the amazing people who mentored her. 2) Joining a board can be a great learning opportunity. As Lori suggested, school doesn't always prepare you for the realities of farming. Often, you need real-world experience, and to rely on the guidance of others who are willing to share their own experiences. Lori treated board meetings as free opportunities to learn about specific aspects of her industry and beyond. Of course, you do have to assess the time commitment of a board, and also which board might be suitable for you. Your passion

for a topic or a board should also be considered. 3) If you don't see the mentor you're looking for, become that mentor for someone else. When Lori mentioned this in the conversation, she was specifically referring to the lack of women leaders in ag when she was a young woman. She clearly had a lot of great mentors, but not really any female farmers. Back in the '80s, it was difficult to find other female farm managers to emulate, so Lori decided that she, herself, needed to become a good example for others to follow. By being a successful woman in agriculture, she helped increase the visibility of women leaders in the industry and likely contributed to the spark that started someone else's farming journey. Sometimes you just have to take initiative and find your own way when others don't provide you an obvious path, and future generations will follow.

Well, that's all the time we have for today. I'd like to thank Lori Robinson for taking some time out of her busy schedule to share her wisdom with our audience. Thanks again, Lori. I hope everyone listening has a great day. And as always, dream, grow, thrive.

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