Sue McGregor says there’s more to agribusiness than meets the eye, and she can imagine no other life.

“I love agriculture and all it represents: the people, the culture, the work ethic and the fact that it produces something tangible. I love that it has purpose: you can see it, grow it, eat it and sell it. I also love that it’s constantly evolving.”

Growing up on her family’s peanut farm near Kingaroy in Queensland’s South Burnett Region, Sue loved the space and the freedom, and these early life experiences shaped her choices.

“I enjoy the outdoors, so getting my hands dirty was perfect. After studying Ag Science, majoring in Soils and Extension, at Queensland University, I worked as an agronomist for 10 years.”
Constant improvement

Her underlying desire for continual improvement led Sue to establish an independent crop research company with business partner Pete Hamblin in 2000, which quickly grew into a nationwide research enterprise specialising in agricultural and horticultural contract services in broad acre and irrigated crops, trees, vegetables and vines. Kalyx Australia Pty Ltd has a board of six Executive Directors and ten shareholders, all of whom work in the business. Kalyx employs close to 80 permanent staff and engages another 50 casuals (mostly ag students) over harvest.

“It’s an exciting time for new grads and young people considering agriculture as a career.”

Sue’s role at Kalyx Australia is Director of People and Culture. She works in workplace health and safety for the operations’ team leaders, research agronomists, research support officers, research technicians and commercial and administration workers across Australia.

“Although I am no longer working in the field, I am working with people who are, and in, a business that depends on it. I look after our most precious resource: our people. Part of this is about safety, sure, but it also involves seeing that our people are challenged and then rewarded appropriately.”

Ideas and listening

Sue describes herself as “a mad thinker”, always coming up with ideas and different angles.

“I tend to read through all the evidence or information required, weigh up the pros and cons, look for other angles as well as roadblocks to something not working and crunch the numbers on the options. I combine all of that to help me make the right decision on the day.”

She strongly believes that listening is equally important in formulating opinions and making decisions, whether in the boardroom or the paddock.

She believes her approach to decision-making impacts positively on the business’s productivity and profitability.

“Despite being Kalyx Australia’s only female board member, I don’t think my decisions or value come from just being female. If a business lacks diversity in their decision-making team, my first comment is that it may not be about gender; rather it is about the skillset they are looking for. I wouldn’t like to be viewed as the ‘token female’ on a board. I want to be there because I deserve to be there, and I’m adding value. Turning that around, a business that lacks decision-making diversity would benefit from talking to a board that has good diversity and asking them the value of that.”

Sue’s position as the only female board member reflects findings in the *Diversity in decision-making in rural industries* report, with women representing 26 per cent of the decision-making roles in small businesses, increasing to 41 per cent in medium to large businesses.

Coaching through challenges

This far into her career in a well-established business, Sue feels no major personal challenges.

“The mother guilt has always been challenging and still rears its ugly head during school holidays. But what used to be challenging was accepting I wasn’t superwoman and that I couldn’t control and manage everything.

“I engaged a leadership coach who helped me see challenges and opportunities in a different light, and that enabled me to build my confidence. Now, nothing at board level is too challenging. I work with a great team of positive, like-minded directors. We employ capable staff who are keen and diligent, and who also love agriculture.

For me, the challenge now is keeping young minded, flexible, progressive and open to change as I hit my 50s.”

On the ground today, exactly half of Kalyx Australia’s 78 staff are female.

Sue strongly believes there are genuine opportunities in agriculture for women: in the paddock as technical specialists, then adapting and potentially retraining to a more office-based role.

“My advice to girls is not to get out of the paddock too soon or at all, if they love what they do. I see lots of women who believe their only way to progress is to move out of the paddock. I think that is changing and that’s good.”

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