

## WOMEN IN THE INDUSTRY

# IRIS ALVARADO VERGARA, SENIOR PROCUREMENT DIRECTOR, INNOPHOS

### WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO WORK IN THE FERTILIZER INDUSTRY?

I grew up in an area that is mainly home to the petrochemical and fertilizer industries, so it seemed like a natural fit. Apart from that, my grandparents had a farm where I learned the importance of knowing the soil, using nutrients to grow crops properly and using the right fertilizer, among other things.

### HOW DID YOU START YOUR CAREER IN THE INDUSTRY?

I started my career in the fertilizer industry as an administrative assistant in the engineering department of Albright & Wilson, after applying for the only open position available at the time, so I could make a start in a company which is now known as Innophos. While working there, I was able to study the main phosphate manufacturing processes locally. Later on, the opportunity arose to work in the purchasing and logistics division as coordinator for the sourcing and acquisition of raw materials. From that moment on, I decided to focus my career on the various aspects of the company's supply chain.

This allowed me to work in a number of managerial positions within the corporation related to planning, customer service, vessel chartering, warehousing, distribution and purchasing. Being VP of Global Purchasing and Logistics evolved into my present position as Senior Director of Strategic Raw Materials, Packaging and Energy. Starting my career as an administrative assistant turned out to be a great opportunity to learn as much as I could about the production of specialty phosphates, fertilizers and the importance of the product for the agricultural world.

### WHAT DO YOU FIND THE MOST REWARDING ABOUT YOUR JOB?

Providing direction to international, multi-disciplinary teams has been very gratifying because it allows me to share my knowledge based on 25 years in the fertilizer industry while at the same time continuing to learn more from others. Interaction with other cultures has been very valuable for my job because it is essential to build bridges which in turn lead to commercial relationships and the formation of long term, valuable supply strategies for the business. Being responsible for managing a team of people is a great opportunity to develop their potential to the fullest, so that they can achieve the best possible results under often trying circumstances.

I remember one of many occurrences during my professional journey about 10 years ago when I was Supply Chain Director. The problem we were facing was an imminent shutdown of the main phosphate rock processing plant. The vessel loaded with the rock had to remain at the anchorage because of a confluence of heavy rains, silting and consequently (temporarily) reduced draft at the navigation channel of the port. Through great teamwork, including on the spot chartering of a small vessel, excellent cooperation by pilots and the port authorities and quick sourcing of suitable fenders, we were able to lighten the big vessel at the anchorage in a never before tried ship-to-ship operation. The plant never missed a beat and this event is



**“MY WORK HAS TAUGHT ME THAT THE ESSENTIAL GOAL OF OUR SUPPLY CHAIN REMAINS THE SAME: KEEP UP WITH DEMAND FROM A GROWING WORLD POPULATION USING FINITE RESOURCES.”**

still proudly remembered by those involved as an example of what is possible when everyone pulls together as a team.

### WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU HAD TO OVERCOME?

Entering a male dominated international executive arena as a young female; and having to prove myself as an equal, year after year.

### WHAT ACHIEVEMENT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?

I am proud to say that I was the first foreign woman to hold a VP position in Innophos, which has been a great achievement. Over the course of my career I have also been able to help build on the fine reputation our company has earned in the area of fertilizer and specialty phosphates.

### WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON YOU'VE LEARNED IN YOUR CAREER TO DATE?

Respect your team members, and earn their respect, by following through on your promises, i.e. 'walk the talk'.

### DO YOU THINK YOUR JOB AND THE INDUSTRY WILL CHANGE IN THE FUTURE?

My job has changed a lot over the course of 25 years, and it will keep changing in order to adapt to new developments and customer requirements and lately also because of climate change and the relatively sudden pandemic we all have to live with at the moment. Having a flexible, adaptable, economically sound and technically up to date supply chain is key to staying abreast of our competition. Despite all these changes, my work has taught me that the essential goal of our supply chain remains the same: Keep up with demand from a growing world population using finite resources.

The fertilizer industry has changed and will continue to change because it is not only necessary to produce more, but we also need to have more 'intelligent' fertilizers that will be just as, or more effective, use less water and help to increase grain yields. There are also more efforts being made and resources dedicated to not only improve technology leading to produce more efficient fertilizers, but also to support farmers through proper training in the use of those fertilizers, the importance of nutrients and new planting techniques, which was not the case in the past.

### WHICH FEMALE LEADERS DO YOU ADMIRE AND WHY?

I admire Amelia Earhart, one of the pioneers of aviation and the first woman to cross the Atlantic on a solo flight as well as complete the solo journey from Honolulu to Oakland. Her courage and passion for aviation, and efforts to incorporate women into the aviation sector, is an example of what we are able to do and achieve as females. However, the female leader who has left an indelible footprint on my personality is my own mother. Her values, discipline and innate vocation as a reader have been the best schooling for my life.

### WHERE DO YOU SEE THE BIGGEST CHANGES AS A RESULT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS?

I believe that the pandemic has exposed how fragile global supply chains can be, but it is also showing us how to prevent a bigger problem in the production and distribution of food. There are still many steps to be taken to address the negative impacts on every country and their food supply systems, but I believe that governments will implement measures to reduce their dependency on other countries. I would also expect that inventories and supply chains will be adjusted with the aim of securing a sustainable food supply. The COVID 19 situation could be a wake-up call not only for our industry, but for all governments and citizens in general, to do more not only for food security, but also raise more awareness about the need to preserve our environment.

### HOW DO YOU SEE AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SYSTEMS CHANGING IN THE FUTURE?

I think both systems will lead to more focus on developing and improving farming practices around the world. Climate change and its variability demand the creation of controlled environments for sustainable planting. We could see more greenhouses in those countries where food security is critical and more incentives from national governments like tax relief for citizens with home gardens, energy cost and infrastructure subsidies for farmers, and microloans to women leading sustainable communities. I truly believe that more innovation is yet to come for reducing waste, recycling, recovering phosphates from human activity and improving water quality. I believe that we will be able to achieve sustainable agriculture and food supply systems in the near future.