

Leadership Insight

by Diarmaid Ó Corrbui

Please provide a brief history of your career.

I did the leaving cert in 1978 and with over half of my classmates emigrating due to the serious lack of job opportunities, the offer of a pensionable job in the civil service was too good to turn down. I ended up spending 8 years in the civil service, working in the departments of the Gaeltacht, Social Welfare and Finance. During that time, I received a scholarship to complete a degree in economics and social science in Trinity College. I moved from the civil service into the world of consulting, joining Accenture, working on a range of major projects both in Ireland and abroad. I left Accenture to start up a strategy consulting firm, Prospectus, with a former colleague from Accenture and spent the next 15 years providing consultancy services to a range of organisations in financial services, healthcare, public sector and the nonprofit sector.

Being a management consultant, you get exposed to some very interesting challenges and get to work with some really talented and driven people. It was a fantastic learning and developmental experience. In my mid-forties, I had the clichéd mid-life crisis and I asked myself is this it? Is this what I want to do for the rest of my working life? I decided that I wanted to do something very different and thankfully, with the support and encouragement from my wife, I decided that I would like to put my skills and experience to work in the nonprofit sector. I grew up in a family where both my parents were very active in community and voluntary organisations and serving on committees. I appreciated the importance of voluntary organisations for the social fabric of civic society

and the necessity for people to step forward to take on governance responsibility in these organisations. So when I saw the CEO position in Carmichael being advertised, an excellent organisation that I was familiar with as a consultant, I felt that it would be a great organisation to lead. I put in my application and was fortunate to have been successful and was appointed CEO in October 2011.

Describe your working life as CEO of the Carmichael Centre.

Carmichael is Ireland's first and largest shared services and support centre. Founded in 1990 we are home to 45 resident nonprofit organisations. In Carmichael, we work to do good by providing the following services:

- Office accommodation (offering a range of options from own office to shared desks).
- Support services and facilities. For example, Accounting & Payroll, IT, meeting rooms and catering services.
- Training and capacity development support services to nonprofits nationwide.

We work not only with the 45 resident nonprofit organisations who are based in the Centre, but also with 100s of groups around the country. We work with boards and management committees on governance issues and in helping them to implement best practice and quality standards.

We also provide a mentoring service for CEOs of Charities, information seminars and we disseminate good practice information guidance.

So my working life as CEO of Carmichael is very varied and interesting. A typical day can involve working with our services team to ensure that our facilities are in good condition for the over 30,000 people a year that access our Centre and with providing advice to a board of a nonprofit that is grappling with a challenging governance issue.

What do you think are the biggest challenges people face in relation to the Charities Sector?

The biggest challenge for charities is building and maintaining trust. We in Ireland are painfully aware of costly governance failures in the banking sector that brought the country to the brink of economic collapse and did untold damage to our national reputation. The State sector has also had its share of examples of weak and ineffective corporate governance. The Charities sector too has had its governance failures, where controls and oversight systems have broken down or turned out to be illusory.

Charities up to about five years ago, were one of the few remaining pillars of society, where the public's trust had not been crushed by repeated damning failures. Our trust and confidence in the banks, the church, professional bodies, the political system and various organs of State, have been eroded by a series of scandals arising from poor controls, arrogance and lack a character. Now, regrettably, the Charity sector is a member of this infamous club and the whole sector is being damaged by the grave sins of a few.

Trust is a delicate flower. It can very quickly perish without careful attention and nurturing. We in the Charities sector are now fully aware of the harmful damage that a major failure in corporate governance can have for our organisations and our sector. We no longer can afford to pay lip service to the need to have strong and monitored governance systems in place. It is not acceptable to opt out and leave it to others to worry about the need to adhere to good practice. It is in everyone's interest to ensure that there are robust and effective governance practices in place and that these are regularly reviewed. A single event of poor corporate governance can severely damage a reputation that has taken years to build. Your personal reputation as a manager or as a board member can be at stake as a result of a corporate governance failure in your organisation. Ineffective corporate governance can not only destroy personal and organisational reputations but they also can seriously damage a sector's or even a country's good name and reputation.

Corporate Governance plays a vital part in the Charities Sector and is something you have been heavily involved in. Do you think people need to be more involved and knowledgeable in this area?

Putting yourself forward for consideration or responding positively to an invitation to become a trustee of a charity is a very important and needed act of civic responsibility. The thousands of charities in Ireland play a critical part in society's response to a wide range of human needs. Many are small groups surviving on very limited resources, but are tackling large problems. Through the passion, commitment and activities of these groups, a wide range of needed services and supports are delivered in areas such as health, social services, education, emergency relief, sports and culture. There are tens of thousands of people engaged daily in providing these services. They are creating an untold quantum of public

good - enhancing culture, health, recreation, social justice, and civil and human rights. They are performing roles and making contributions that for many are not recognised or properly valued. However, to run effectively and properly, they need 1,000s of people to step-up and become volunteer board members. The charity sector needs people with the right skills, experience and commitment to serve as trustees and those who do, should be acknowledged and supported.

However, while I strongly encourage people to put themselves forward for consideration, I would also strongly recommend that you do some homework and research before you accept an appointment as a charity trustee. You should ask what will be my governance responsibilities and where can I get the information, advice and support, so that I understand what I need to do to be effective in fulfilling those duties.

A core focus for Carmichael is to provide support and guidance on the design, implementation and oversight of good governance practice. In addition to the comprehensive range of training courses, eLearning modules and information and guidance resources that we provide, we were founding members of the Governance Code for Community, Voluntary and Charitable organisations, we facilitate a board chairpersons network and we run the annual Good Governance Awards to promote and recognise adherence to good governance practice in the nonprofit sector.

Another example of the work that Carmichael does to improve the knowledge of what is involved in being a charity trustee, is the Diploma in Governance for the Charitable Sector that we developed in conjunction with CPA Ireland, details of which can be found at cpaireland.ie/DGCS.

Help and guidance is available and I would encourage those who are currently charity trustees and those



that are thinking about getting involved, to seek out the support that is available and ensure that they are aware of and understand their governance responsibilities.

You were appointed Board Member of the National Advocacy Service for People with Disabilities and also of Enclude. How did this come about?

Over the years, I have served on a number of nonprofit boards and committees. Also as CEO of Carmichael and the work we do, I have developed an expertise and insight to good governance which has led me to being asked to serve on boards. I was asked by both of these two charities to join their boards and after completing a due diligence process and satisfying myself that these were excellent organisations, involved in charitable purposes that I could relate to and I felt that I could perform a useful role as a board member, I agreed to become a member for a specific term.

I am grateful to my own board in Carmichael who consented to allow me take on these board positions. I am also very conscious that in order to meet my responsibilities as Carmichael CEO and as a board member of these two organisations, that I need to limit my board membership to just two organisations.

To date what has been your career highlight?

Over a forty year working career to date, there have been both challenging and rewarding times. It is hard to single out one in particular, but if pressed, I would have to say helping Carmichael to respond effectively to a major financial challenge in 2012-13 and to grow and enhance the range and supports that Carmichael provides to the sector.

Getting through this difficult period needed a strong and supportive board and staff and I was very

fortunate in having both as we worked our way through some very difficult but necessary actions to ensure the continued sustainability of Carmichael.

Who or what inspires you most in business?

I get inspired by people who are passionate and committed to the work they are doing but who are also both humble and wise in knowing the importance and value in seeking advice and guidance from people that can help them to be better and more effective in what they do. In my career as a civil servant, management consultant and a CEO of Carmichael, I have met many people that have inspired and helped me, but unfortunately, I have also encountered others who feel that they know best and that they don't need any challenge to what they are doing and how they are doing it.

What is the most important business lesson that you have learned in your career to date?

The importance of taking prompt and decisive action when faced with important decisions. Of course, do your homework and analysis to assess your options. But don't prevaricate. Make the decision and take the necessary action. Experience has taught me that, unfortunately, delaying in taking decisive action can make matters worse.

How do you unwind?

In January this year, I decided to take on the 100 day challenge of walking 10,000 steps for 100 days. It has been fantastic. I have created time for myself that I didn't think I had. I have lost weight (much needed), sleep better and get to listen to some wonderful podcasts as I step in pursuit of my daily target. Definitely something I am going to continue.



Diarmaid Ó Corrbuí
CEO of Carmichael,

Diarmaid is CEO of Carmichael, Ireland's oldest and biggest shared services facility for the nonprofit sector. He is a board member of the National Advocacy Service for People with Disabilities and of Enclude. He is a former Chairman of Acquired Brain Injury Ireland and Ruhama.

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