

# Leadership Insight

## Leading through the Covid-19 Crisis

by Niall Gibbons



Niall Gibbons,  
CEO of  
Tourism Ireland

### Please provide a brief history of your career.

It has been said that authentic leadership begins with the story of your life. When I was asked to write a brief history of my career, I thought, where do I start? College? My time as a trainee accountant? My post-qualification experience? Maybe my career started when I was 11, working as a delivery boy in the local pharmacy in Rathmines, until I graduated to selling papers outside the church on Sundays when I was 14 and then, when I worked at the local cinema when I was 15 until I turned 23. I remember a great mentor of mine back then, Albert Kelly, who owned the Classic Cinema in Harold's Cross (where the Rocky Horror Picture Show got going) telling me at 15 that "you are going to be learning your most important lesson in life over the coming years – dealing with people". It's the most valuable advice I have ever received.

After I graduated, in what was then ESS from Trinity College in 1988, I spent the next four years of my career as an accountant with Coopers and Lybrand. I worked in what was then called 'Business Services' – which provided a wide range of services to clients such as audit, tax and consultancy. While certain aspects of the accounting work never appealed, the social side never let me down. I moved on to work in the private sector for a number of years. An opportunity came up in the public sector and I joined the Marine Institute as Financial Controller in 1994 and left as Director of Corporate Services in 2002. The public service was a big change for me. It meant different ways of doing things, a new style of communication and

accountability. But the value of the accounting qualification, combined with a capacity to deal with people, was an invaluable combination.

In 2002, I moved to Tourism Ireland and took on the role of Director of Corporate Services and Company Secretary. Tourism Ireland was established after the Good Friday Agreement, to promote the island of Ireland overseas as a holiday destination. It combined the work previously carried out separately by Bord Fáilte and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. I started just after 9/11 and Foot and Mouth outbreak – so dealing with a crisis was something I got used to.

In June 2009, I was appointed Chief Executive of Tourism Ireland. I oversee the marketing of the island of Ireland across the world, leading a team of over 160 staff in 21 markets, whose work is underpinned by sustainable destination marketing principles. Over the years, I've led our organisation's expansion into new markets such as China and the Middle East and I've overseen the emergence of Tourism Ireland as a leader in digital marketing and social media. We've seen innovative developments, like partnerships with LucasFilm and HBO, which allowed Tourism Ireland to leverage the global success of Star Wars and Game of Thrones, to showcase the island of Ireland overseas in a new way. I'm also proud of what the team has achieved in developing Tourism Ireland's Global Greening initiative, which has brought tourism to the heart of St Patrick's Day celebrations across the world. The World Economic Forum ranks Ireland third in the world out of 136 countries for 'effectiveness of marketing and branding to attract

tourists. Most of all though, tourism is a people business and the people who work in tourism are really great colleagues.

In 2019, I was elected President of Dublin Chamber, which was a great honour. The Chamber represents 1,300 businesses across Dublin, which employ over 200,000 people. Being President also meant chairing board and council meetings, which brought me in contact with a new audience and network which I really enjoyed.

The work of Tourism Ireland also brings me into a great deal of contact with government ministers and officials on both sides of the border. I am very proud of the role that tourism, and my colleagues in Tourism Ireland, have played in the peace process.

### How has the onset of Covid-19 affected your marketing of Ireland as a holiday destination?

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on tourism around the globe. Normally, 1.4 billion trips are taken around the world each year, with a global spend of US\$1.4 trillion. Tourism is a valuable export to our own economy, with overseas spend reaching €5.8 billion in 2019 and supporting 325,000 jobs across the island of Ireland.

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting impact on international tourism and travel, almost all of Tourism Ireland's paid-for promotional activity has been cancelled or postponed, since March. However, we have been running an extensive online campaign, using the hashtag #FillYourHeartWithIreland. Because people can't travel here

from overseas, the campaign aims to bring the best of Ireland onto people's screens and to help ensure that Ireland stays 'front-of-mind' with prospective visitors for future holidays. It's about sharing inspirational content and keeping them connected with Ireland until they can travel here once more. This is based on the insight that brands and destinations which maintain some level of activity during recessions or other downturns rebound more strongly than those brands who go silent during the same period.

In the face of the fundamental changes facing our industry, we know that we need a comprehensive understanding of the changed consumer and the new marketplace. Right now, Tourism Ireland is carrying out an extensive Covid-19 programme of research in our major markets. Looking forward to when international tourism to Ireland is back, this research will help us identify when consumers are ready to consider holidaying again and which of our markets offer us the best short-term prospects. We will explore in-depth which segments and demographics are most likely to travel, which products and experiences will most appeal to them and what messaging will most strongly convince them to consider holidaying on the island of Ireland. The insights we gain will ensure that our future promotional plan is as tightly targeted and as powerfully motivational as it possibly can be, in order to drive a strong recovery, as quickly as it is possible to realise it.

**The global pandemic of Covid-19 has been a huge shock to the worldwide economy and how businesses operate. As a leader, how have you navigated your employees through the past number of months and the changes it has brought?**

When we launched our plans for 2020, we were certainly conscious that the year ahead would continue to present some challenges for Irish tourism – including the ongoing uncertainty around Brexit, the economic and geo-political



uncertainty, as well as constraints on the availability of aircraft. However, nothing could have prepared the Tourism Ireland team for the biggest crisis the travel and tourism industry has ever faced across the globe – the outbreak and spread of Covid-19 this spring. It is, without doubt, an unprecedented crisis and the entire team is working hard to navigate our way through what is probably the most difficult trading environment we've ever experienced.

There have been many unknowns and uncertainties over the past few months, so regular communication has been absolutely key – particularly as the Tourism Ireland team is based in so many different locations, across different time zones. In this situation that we've never seen before, my aim has been to bring our people around the world together.

There is much disruption and distress right now; however, this will change. I believe that leading through a crisis like Covid-19 involves managing the here and now, but also taking a longer-term view, where possible, to prepare as best as possible

for the future. I also believe it is important not to lose sight of your organisation's values during a crisis, as strong core values can play a key role in guiding an organisation through uncertain times. Tourism Ireland's core values are respect, collaboration, ownership and creativity; keeping sight of these has undoubtedly helped the Tourism Ireland team navigate the choppy waters of the past few months.

**With the impact of Covid-19 and no overseas visitors coming to Ireland, how do you see the tourism sector recovering from this pandemic?**

While Covid-19 remains first and foremost a public health issue for now, this virus has had, and continues to have, unprecedented and extremely serious consequences for tourism operators across the island of Ireland – with the closure of hotels, visitor attractions, bars and restaurants for many months, as well as the cancellation of events, conferences and sports activities. Previous crises such as Foot & Mouth, SARS, 9/11 and the volcanic ash



## “The access landscape has profoundly changed since the outbreak of Covid-19.”

Given that tourism is our largest indigenous industry, responsible for in excess of 4% of GNP in Ireland, a return to growth as quickly as possible is vital. I sit on two newly-established taskforces – in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland – which have been set up specifically to identify measures to enable tourism to recover from the devastating effects of Covid-19. I was also a member of the Aviation Recovery Taskforce.

There is no question that the shape of the Irish tourism industry that emerges from this crisis will be different than it was at the beginning of 2020. Tour operators who have programmed the island of Ireland for many years may be forced to scale back their inventory significantly. It is too soon to say what, if any, of the ‘Ireland experience’ for overseas visitors will be changed. However, we in Tourism Ireland will do everything we can to support our industry partners to get them back to the overseas marketplace – when the time is right.

cloud in 2010 dramatically dampened demand. Covid-19 has dwarfed all these other crises.

By way of background – last year, we welcomed over 11 million overseas visitors to the island of Ireland, who spent over €5.8 billion during their time here. And, while we warmly welcomed the reopening of our industry for domestic holidaymakers at the end of June, there is no doubt that ‘staycations’ will fall well short of what is required to sustain employment. In a typical year, spend by overseas visitors’ accounts for around 75% of total revenue for our industry.

Last summer, there were more than 615,000 direct, one-way seats available on planes flying to the island of Ireland every week. The access landscape has profoundly changed since the outbreak of Covid-19. Airline industry analysts OAG predict that it will be three to four years before Europe’s capacity returns to the levels seen in 2019. As an island destination, strong air and sea access links are vital; so, the restoration of air connectivity will be essential to restoring growth in overseas tourism to Ireland.



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In terms of the competitive landscape, the global re-start of travel is likely to be extremely competitive. Large tour operators and accommodation providers may flood the market with cheap, unsold inventory for destinations all over Europe. The island of Ireland will need to offer good value to hold its market share. Longer-haul markets are likely to take more time to recover than those nearer-to-home.

Once the current crisis of Covid-19 is past, Tourism Ireland will be ready on the ground to roll out an extensive global recovery kick-start programme – but only when the time is right. We have begun the process of planning for the recovery of overseas tourism.

Our focus is on having promotional campaigns which will be ready to go, once there are signs that consumers overseas are getting back on the move and that Ireland is open for business. We will be working flat out to recover as much business as possible.

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

Your capacity to deal with people is so important – but essential to survive a crisis.

### **What advice would you give to aspiring leaders today?**

Work hard. Invest in people. Delegate. Develop your network. Get involved. Listen to advice. Communicate effectively. Surround yourself with positive people. Maintain a good sense of humour. The job isn't the 'be all and end all' – so mind your health.

Authentic leadership begins with the story of your life. Know your story. It will reveal your strengths and weaknesses, which will help guide you through life.

### **Have you been able to step away from challenges the last few months have brought and unwind?**

There is no doubt that it has been an extremely busy and challenging few months. I have had a number of short breaks with family and friends this summer which I have really enjoyed. Having spent 18 years on the road abroad, it's my longest spell at home. Unfortunately, the tennis and golf show no signs of improvement! However, I have had what has felt like a four-month family reunion. And that's what matters.

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