

Leadership Insight

by Eamonn Siggins



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Please provide a brief history of your career.

My career started as a seventeen year old when I was awarded a cadetship in the Defence Forces and travelled to the Military College in the Curragh, Co. Kildare. The mission of the Cadet School is "to develop leaders of character and prepare them for the exercise of command authority; provide the requisite knowledge, skills and competencies to ensure operational effectiveness; and train collectively to inculcate discipline and esprit de corps".

The Cadet School experience certainly equipped me for a 14-year career in the Defence Forces. I served in a variety of roles within the Defence Forces both at home and with the United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon.

I retired from the Defence Forces in the rank of Captain in 1989 to take on the newly created role of Manager – Services to Members in CPA Ireland.

I was fortunate to land on a role which had a well-developed sense of purpose and was created following detailed research among the CPA membership. I was also impressed with the values of the CPA leaders who interviewed me, and I was enthused by their passion for CPA Ireland.

However, my greatest fortune was to have an encouraging and supportive mentor in the then Chief Executive of CPA Ireland, William G. (Liam) Donnelly. Liam Donnelly allowed me to operate with autonomy, encouraged constantly and celebrated success. Having a mentor is very important in leadership development and was highly

beneficial for me in transitioning from a career in the military to one in business.

The next career change was to become Deputy Chief Executive in CPA Ireland in 1992 and then taking on the leadership role as Chief Executive in December 1993 on the retirement of Liam Donnelly.

Along the career journey in CPA Ireland I have also had the privilege of serving as Technical Adviser to CPA Ireland's two Board members at the International Federation of Accountants, namely Bernadette McGrory – Farrell and Gail McEvoy. I have also served as Secretary to the Edinburgh Group for 6 years and was elected Chairman of the Edinburgh Group in November 2016, and, in 2018 I was re-elected for a final 2-year term.

How did your experience in the Defence Forces prepare you for a leadership role?

It is important to appreciate that military leadership training is designed to prepare leaders to operate in a high-risk environment. Tactical and technical proficiency are not enough as a military leader must be guided by a moral and ethical code which transcends self-interest.

This early introduction to an ethical code has served me well in a profession which is bound by a global code of ethics and, in this respect, distinguishes accountancy from many other professions. Much of military leadership training is instantly transferable into the world of business as it is values based and imbues leaders with respect, loyalty, selflessness, physical courage, moral courage and integrity. Military

leadership training also involves intellectual development and further education which develops an appreciation of the economic, social, political and cultural aspects of the society in which the Defence Forces operate.

Critical thinking, decision making and problem solving are tested time and again often under pressure. For me, very importantly, J.P. Kotter (1990) wrote in his article "What leaders really do" for the Harvard Business Review:

"No one has yet figured out how to manage people into battle; they must be led", and, in terms of career experience: "perhaps the most important is significant challenge early in a career. Leaders almost always have had opportunities during their twenties and thirties to actually try to lead."

Military leadership training clearly distinguishes between managing and leading and offers significant opportunities to lead early in a career. The confidence that such experience brings is difficult to simulate in any business school.

However, there are aspects of military leadership training that do not transfer seamlessly into other leadership roles. Military leadership training is designed to ensure that leaders will continue to try to solve a problem even in the face of certain failure. This training ensures that military leaders act quickly and decisively amid chaos. So, in certain military situations, it would be calamitous for a leader to reveal his/her true emotions or to pause to take account of the feelings and emotions of others.

This inscrutable demeanour may suit the military environment but does not translate well outside of that environment. In fact, it may be perceived as austere or lacking in empathy. In my own case, I constantly need to work on empathy to be aware of, understand and appreciate the feelings of others and I have asked my direct reports to monitor my progress and let me know if I slip.

Finally, military leadership is often misconceived as "leading from the front" but this is not the reality. In 2012, Elliott Peterson, in his article "Improve Employee Leadership with Ideas borrowed from the Military" wrote that the answer to the question where should a leader be is "at the point of friction". This means that a leader should be present in person wherever they expect the greatest difficulty will arise. Having this sense of positional leadership is an asset in any business environment.

The investment in leadership training coupled with the exposure to leadership opportunities prepares Defence Forces personnel for leadership roles in any environment. I believe this is borne out by the plethora of former Defence Forces personnel holding senior leadership positions in every sector in Ireland.

As well as Chief Executive of CPA Ireland, you also Chair the Edinburgh Group. How do you feel these roles benefit or complement each other?

By way of background the Edinburgh Group is a coalition of 16 international accountancy organisations representing over 900,000 professional accountants in countries from Africa, Latin America, Asia, Australia, India and Europe.

The Group meets 4 to 5 times per annum in plenary session and interacts with key global stakeholders to the accountancy profession. The Edinburgh Group focuses its influence on issues affecting accountants in Small to Medium Practices, Small to Medium Enterprises and in developing nations.



Being Chairman of the Edinburgh Group is my first experience in leading a group of high-level professionals from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds. The challenge for me has been to enhance my cultural agility, be conscious of cultural diversity, and understand different perspectives to foster effective collaboration.

A key challenge is in the area of communication where in some Edinburgh Group member countries good communication is precise, simple and clear. Messages are expressed and understood at face value. Other cultures differ greatly, and, for them, good communication is sophisticated, nuanced and layered. Messages can be both spoken and read between the lines. The challenge for a leader in such an environment is to have the cultural intelligence to interpret unfamiliar gestures the way that person's compatriot would.

Being alert to cultural difference and working on cultural agility has complemented my role in CPA Ireland and has assisted in moving CPA Ireland to becoming "global" through strategic partnerships with some of the largest professional bodies on the planet; holding leadership roles within the global profession; winning and successfully delivering capacity building projects with economic and societal benefits in countries as diverse as Mozambique, Rwanda and Nigeria, and, hosting inward training initiatives in Ireland for accountants from Lithuania, Sri Lanka, India and Nigeria.

Cross cultural international leadership within the Edinburgh Group complements my role as Chief Executive of CPA Ireland in terms of navigating the significant variations in the ways people from different societies think, lead and get things done.

Like CPA Ireland, the Edinburgh Group has a strong sense of purpose in which volunteers dedicate their time and expertise in the service of something larger than themselves. CPA Ireland is also a very "purpose led" organisation within which we can develop principled, agile and high-level strategies that devolve tactical agility to the leadership. As a leader, I find it stimulating to operate in an organisation with a very clear sense of purpose and both the Edinburgh Group and CPA Ireland offer that opportunity.

Finally, the Edinburgh Group is an exceptionally strategic network of powerful advocates and CPA Ireland has benefitted from collaboration, resource sharing, joint research and strategic partnerships with many of the international peer bodies in the Edinburgh Group.

What is the biggest challenge facing CPA Ireland accountants?

The advancement of machine learning and the impact it will have on the world of accountancy and finance is an exciting challenge that accountants can meet head on and use to their benefit.

Any technology transformation is, innately, a human transformation and the human capacity to adapt and evolve should never be underestimated. Globally, in industries of all sizes, there is a race to unlock the value of data, to enable business processes with technology and to create digitally enhanced experiences for customers.

In terms of leadership, I see my role as empowering the talented and innovative team at CPA Ireland to continue to deliver the service and support to CPAs, and those studying to become CPAs, to help them to meet this challenge head on.

After 30 years working in CPA Ireland, what aspects of your role do you find exciting and challenging?

For me, the most exciting aspect of leadership is to lead in an environment of disruption.

Disruption is not a new phenomenon. It is, more explicitly, the accelerating frequency of disruption that poses a new challenge for organisations.

Its unpredictable temperament and the pace at which it arrives often leave organisational leaders devoid of control, let alone equipped to make strategic decisions.

This means organisational strategy needs to be at the ready in a new kind of way, so we are all prepared to take advantage when opportunities knock, as disruption plays out in real time. At CPA Ireland, the Council has developed a strategy that is agile and principled enough to cope with disruption. It is exciting to have the opportunity to deliver on that strategy!

Innovation is at the heart of what we do in CPA Ireland and, if the external environment is changing at such a pace, the obvious antidote for organisations such as ours is to innovate and continue to create value. CPA Ireland is lightly resourced and yet needs to make faster and smarter progress towards our goals. Our challenge is to be innovative and embrace creativity as a tool within the

organisation to solve those deep and painful problems that disruption will cause for our members.

From my perspective, for organisations to change the people within such organisations must change. What is exciting about my role is the significance that our Council places on people, be they staff or volunteers. The Council has invested in the development of our people so that, as a leader, I am supported and challenged by a team of dedicated, innovative, customer focused people committed to a common purpose. As a leader, I am a greater fan of creating more leaders rather than simply creating followers. So, if I go back to the start of my own career in CPA Ireland, in as much as I appreciated Liam Donnelly as my mentor, I must now become the mentor to the next generation of talent on the CPA Ireland team. I do not use the word talent lightly, because we have some talented people who are already empowered to operate autonomously and deliver value.

So, having the right strategy, a great culture, a spirit of innovation and talented people is what makes leading CPA Ireland exciting and challenging for me.

What inspires you most in business?

The honest answer is no one single individual. I will admit that I look to many sources for elements of inspiration and I do keep a journal or a central source of lessons that I pick up from others.

After 30 years in CPA Ireland, I have seen incredible CPAs develop from students to CEOs, CFOs, and the full spectrum of leadership positions in so many diverse environments. For me, having been on the journey with so many high-level leaders inspires me to work alongside, and learn from, the next generation of CPAs who are determined to reach their leadership potential.

I am always inspired by the community of entrepreneurs who establish their own businesses,

create wealth, create employment and sustain society. To add to that, I am even more inspired by the community of CPAs that act as advisers to over 100,000 businesses in Ireland and can continually evolve to deliver value to such a diverse client base.

What advice would you give to managers and aspiring leaders today?

Firstly, gain a clear understanding of the difference between management and leadership. Learn from others and continuously seek out mentors who can share their valuable experience. Become self-aware, gain an understanding of your strengths and weaknesses and work to improve on those weaknesses. Most of all, for me, be yourself as everybody seeks out authenticity in leaders they admire and respect.

Oscar Wilde is credited with saying: "Be yourself, everybody else is taken" and I believe that advice remains true today for those who aspire to leadership.

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Commences in CPA Ireland, 1989.