

Leadership Insight

by Geraldine Ruane

Please provide a brief history of your career.

I began my career qualifying as a Certified Public Accountant in 1989, and later as a Chartered Director. I have held C-level and board positions in both the public and private sectors, and throughout my career, I have advocated for strong leadership, female empowerment and commercial focus.

I began my career in the private sector, in the pharmaceutical industry, where I have held senior roles in Mallinckrodt, Novartis and Chanelle Group. From there I moved into the public sector as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Ordnance Survey Ireland for 7 years before taking up my current role as Chief Operating Officer (COO) of Trinity College in 2013.

I have held Executive and Non-Executive Board Positions within the Pharma, ICT, HE, Government and Charity Sectors. I currently Chair the Steering Committee of Trinity Technology Enterprise Campus, a billion Euro project that comprises a new innovation district planned on 5.5 acres in Dublin Docklands designed to help Ireland attract investments, talent and jobs.

I strongly believe that people are at the heart of every successful business and enjoy sharing my knowledge and expertise in building strong leadership and team development within organisations. To that end, I qualified as an executive and business coach and have completed executive training on leadership programmes at Harvard in the US and IMD in Switzerland.

As a champion for diversity and inclusion, I have supported initiatives that address gender imbalances in organisations and

served as a Lead Mentor on the Irish Government supported 'Going for Growth' Programme for women entrepreneurs.

Describe your working life as COO in Trinity College Dublin.

I joined Trinity College as Chief Operating Officer in 2013. Trinity College Dublin is Ireland's premier university. The pursuit of excellence through research and scholarship is at the heart of a Trinity education as is the desire to be a University of Global Consequence.

My role as the Chief Operating Officer (COO) is a broad role with a range of responsibilities. I provide strategic leadership, management and organisation of the university's professional and support functions. My focus is on delivering professional, agile and customer-centric services that enable Trinity to achieve its mission and vision in a cost-effective manner. I focus my efforts on meeting the needs of all our stakeholders. I report directly to the Provost and am an ex officio member of the Board.

In the last number of years there has been significant change in higher education environment. Funding pressures, increased competition and advances in technology create both opportunities and threats. Trinity like all other universities were going through the same challenges and opportunities. The experience of the recent deep recession in Ireland has taught us that we need to be innovative and relentless in driving change.

I play a key role in leading transformational change and driving digital transformation in this large and complex environment. We have developed programmes designed to optimise organisational structure,

systems implementation, large-scale process re-engineering and large capital projects. We are laser-focused on building culture and delivering customer service in a meaningful and measurable way. To that end I work closely with my 7 Directors and 13 functional areas with a staff of 900 in the Corporate Services Division.

In my current role, I am responsible for increasing commercial revenue and have helped to establish commercial initiatives with local and international organisations. This has provided additional external funding to support student and staff services in support of the university's mission and to help eliminate the university financial deficit.

As a Chief Officer I supported the Provost in the development, implementation and successful delivery of an ambitious five year (2014-2019) strategic plan for the University. We are currently working on our new 5-year strategic plan.

I work closely with a diverse group of stakeholders that includes commercial partners, government departments and agencies and international peer universities. In addition to formal meetings with senior colleagues, I also meet regularly with academics, the staff within my areas of responsibility and with students.

Finally, in keeping with my own belief that 'people are the heart of every successful business', I have supported training in leadership, mentorship and coaching to help drive the capability of our teams.

What has been your most challenging role or leadership challenge to date?

Across all the roles I have held, both in the public and private sectors, the biggest leadership challenge I've faced common to all of them has been the need to build agility in both myself and the organisations I lead in order to respond to the increasing levels and pace of change facing our businesses.

The changes we have to respond to have come from many sources; changes in markets, competitors, new technologies, changing demands from our customer and stakeholder requirements, coupled with shrinking public sector funding. One area I always focus on in building our organisational responsiveness muscle is the area of individual and team development, continuously working on building a culture of teamwork, participation, empowerment and dialogue, and consistent communication and engagement with our stakeholders on decision making.

What do you think are the biggest challenges accountants face today?

The Technological and Regulatory challenges facing Accountants today are very significant. In addition, Accountants are expected to work closely with managers at all levels in the organisation, operating at both operational and strategic levels providing valuable input to decision making as well as perform the traditional reporting functions.

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A trend I see continuing is the expectation from the business for accountants to proactively contribute to strategic conversations about the future, to bring to discussions good commercial awareness and well-argued opinions. If I were starting my accounting career today, I would look for opportunities to develop my influencing skills, networking skills and my emotional intelligence at the same time as developing my technical accounting knowledge.

You were recently chosen as Chair of the steering committee for Trinity Technology and Enterprise Campus (TTEC). Can you tell me more about what this involves?

TTEC will be a new world class university at the heart of the Grand Canal Innovation District and will be the catalyst for collaboration and partnership between industry and universities. Dr Patrick Prendergast, Provost of Trinity took the historic step to developing this second campus dedicated to technology and innovation. TTEC will be built on a designated 5.5-acre site adjacent to Grand Canal Quay and Macken Street in the heart of the district.

Working closely with the local community, a campus of style and impact, with open spaces, ease of access and new retail spaces and services will spark further urban regeneration in the area as well as create educational and employment opportunities for all those living in close proximity to the district."

The Provost of Trinity College and An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar T.D., recently launched this far-reaching plan for the creation of the Grand Canal Innovation District in Dublin. The proposal from Trinity College Dublin is modelled on innovation districts in cities such as Boston, Toronto, Rotterdam and Barcelona. It will significantly strengthen Ireland's competitive advantage when developing new indigenous companies or competing for foreign direct investment.



As Chair of the TTEC Steering Committee we are responsible for the governance (oversight, guidance and enablement) of the current Trinity Technology & Enterprise Campus into a second innovation campus of the university. It is an exciting and challenging role and I am very pleased to be involved in its development.

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

I have learned that success demands that I set high standards for myself and others and that I work to meet those standards and support others in doing the same. Knowing what I want and setting goals to achieve them.

That does not mean I will have everything immediately, but it does mean I am taking consistent action toward my goals. It means holding myself accountable and rather than looking for excuses for mediocre performance it is finding new ways to go above and beyond in pursuing my goals.

Anthony Robbins, a world leadership guru says, "when you raise your standards and turn "should" into



"must," you are making an inner shift to take control over the quality of your life. Any area you are not getting what you want is because you haven't raised your standards".

To date what has been your career highlight?

I have been fortunate to have led some wonderful organisations in both the private and public sector. My current role as COO of Trinity is certainly a key highlight of my career. It is a privilege to be a part of Trinity, a global brand with worldwide recognition. Trinity is renowned academically, delivers on a superior student experience, is an iconic tourism landmark, a successful commercial operation and now a driver of unparalleled innovation with the new TTEC. I get to work at the heart of this organisation - I am very lucky indeed!

Who or what inspires you most in business?

I am very impressed by Christine Lagarde, who was the first woman to head the IMF-(International Monetary Fund) and the first woman to become Finance Minister of a G8 Economy. I had the pleasure of hearing her speak

when she visited Trinity College this year. She shared her definition of leadership which resonates with what I believe leadership is really about.

"To me, it's about encouraging people. It's about stimulating them. It's about enabling them to achieve what they can achieve — and to do that with a purpose. Others would call it a "vision" but I'd rather use "purpose" because I think that everybody has a purpose in life and that when collectively people work together or practice sport together, they have a joint purpose."

From the sporting world I am inspired by the leadership of Paul McGinley who is a world-respected professional golfer. He led a team of 12 European players against the American team, captained by Tom Watson, to success in the Ryder cup of 2014. The European side was fulsome in their praise and admiration for McGinley's leadership. As a true leader Paul said that the players have only themselves to thank, after the way in which they responded to both his decisions and the pressure they were under. Paul's participative and involving style of leadership showed huge emotional intelligence.

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

The advice I share below is a short collection of what I have found helpful for myself on my own leadership journey.

Know Yourself! Continually invest in your own and your people's development. You need never stop growing intellectually, mentally, and emotionally.

Build in reflection time in your workday to review your own reactions and underlying assumptions and the beliefs you hold as absolutes. Review your interactions over the past day and reflect on the impact your words had on others and encourage your team to do this also.

Listen, learn and engage with people. I say it again, "People are at the heart of every successful business"

Develop a curiosity. As leaders we need to be curious about everything—about what the possibilities are, what the future opportunities and threats might be, and to be able to see issues from different perspectives and be proactive in seeking and using feedback.

For all aspiring leaders, I would recommend every piece of advice in Ronald Heifetz's book on leading change (called The Practice of Adaptive Leadership)

How do you unwind?

In my downtime I am a lover of outdoor pursuits whether it be playing golf, hill walking, attending regional, national and international sporting events and enjoying weekends away. I have a love of dancing, enjoy most music and relaxing with family and friends.

"People are at the heart of every successful business"



Geraldine Ruane,
Chief Operating Officer,
Trinity College