

# Leadership Insight – Sarah O'Connor



Sarah O'Connor is the  
CEO of the Irish Asthma  
Society.

## Can you provide a brief history of your career?

I did a BA in Arts in University College Cork, where I studied English and History and I spent a year in a Boston College on scholarship. What followed until recently were careers beginning with p - publishing, politics and then PR.

My first real foray was as a team of three starting the Irish branch of an established international publishing company. After 18 months, I moved to Oxford to work with Oxford University Press and I've tried to replicate the fulfilment I got from creating something really excellent since that time.

I moved home after the 2007 general election to work as a Parliamentary Assistant for my local TD, Tom Hayes. I wrote speeches, engaged with journalists, drafted (and delivered) leaflets, dodged dogs on canvasses, created a social media strategy, planned referendums and campaigns. In 2011, I got a job running the youth wing of Fine Gael. It felt like a real opportunity to see an organisation develop and change and to play a role in that change.

In 2014, I started as Dublin Regional Organiser for Fine Gael. Elections are competitive and can feel like very large aquariums - lots of brilliant varieties of fish to nurture and a few sharks to dodge. I had to learn how to read a room and manage conflict, which was a challenge, but I still feel a rush of pride when I see politicians I worked with make change happen.

I spent almost three years working with Drury Porter Novelli, a PR agency in Dublin. I worked across multiple clients, many of whom are household names. It forced me to be tough and to focus on key priorities - doing three things well is better than attempting the perfectionist dream of 73 things and failing.

While I loved the variety and the intellectual challenge of agency life, I wanted a role with less advice-giving and more decision-making.

## You were appointed CEO of the Asthma Society of Ireland in January 2018. Did you set out with a plan to be CEO of an NGO or did you discover a path as you progressed through your career?

I've never been the obsessive career planner type. To clarify, I'm ambitious, I enjoy working, I've even dabbled seriously with being a workaholic, but I've never had a ten-year plan. I've always followed the chunky project or the interesting experience that I felt I lacked - even when this meant sideways move, less status or less money. There have been nights when I have laid awake doubting some of those decisions.

For me, the interview with the Asthma Society changed all of that. The experience I had chased so hard no longer made my career trajectory look odd or speckled. The experience made me feel like I was the right person for the job. I was surprised to feel a reciprocal attitude from the panel and I relaxed in the interview. I am so glad they offered me the job.

## Describe your working life as CEO of the Asthma Society of Ireland.

My working life in the Asthma Society is still evolving as I'm only in the role for five months, but I'm loving it so far. Our team and our board are deeply committed and smart people who want to make sure that the 470,000 people in Ireland with asthma have the best services and supports possible.

I start early one to two mornings with networking or breakfast events. I find the early mornings hard, but it does really deliver in productivity. I like to block-book time for big tasks and parcel it out over days - it makes big projects less intimidating to start. I also find the quieter

time in the office when people have left very helpful if I need to plan something out. I work late fairly frequently with board meetings, events or project work but I've gotten more disciplined about leaving on time on evenings when there's no specific deadline or event.

I hear from people who are struggling to manage it, who are finding it so expensive to have asthma, who are scared, and, sometimes, who have lost someone to this disease. I have asthma and it had a big impact on my life and that of my family. To be honest, I feel extraordinarily lucky to have this job.

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### What initiatives are you working on within the Asthma Society of Ireland?

We need people in Ireland to know and recognise asthma attacks and to know how to manage if one happens. We're working on some big public awareness and online campaigns in the next year to really show how dangerous an asthma attack can be – one person a week in Ireland dies as a result of their asthma and 90% of those deaths are preventable.

People with asthma can do so much to keep themselves well – they can step-up or step-down their medications, recognise their asthma triggers, keep fit and healthy. But it's hard for people to know what self-management tools are out there for people with asthma (or for their carers). We'll be working very hard to help people to develop their asthma management plan so that it puts them back in the driving seat.

I'm currently obsessed with changing our schools programme. I want us to create a schools programme that has a basis in science, is engaging, fun and memorable for primary and secondary students, reassures teachers and parents about asthma management in school – so that the asthma management messages really stick. I want us to roll it out to every place possible in Ireland so that we never have to lose another young person to asthma.

In Australia, every school is mandated in law to have an asthma emergency pack and every teacher and pupil knows what to do in the event of an asthma attack. I'd sleep better at night knowing that we have created that level of safety for young people with asthma.

### As CEO of the Asthma Society of Ireland, what is your biggest leadership challenge?

The biggest challenge is really about fundraising because we are so ambitious about how the Asthma Society can improve the lives with people with asthma. I'd like our team to take on new projects – revitalise our schools programme for the one in five children with asthma, create peer supports for people with asthma, improve our workplace programme and grow our research capability.

I have to balance that hunger to do more and to do it better with the need to fund that work. I'm trying to lead us to a place where we have a better more diversified fundraising strategy. It's a constant tug-of-war for any not-for-profit in Ireland today.

### To date what has been your career highlight?

We worked very hard as a team to put together our Pre-Budget Submission. We carved out ten policy changes that would revolutionise asthma care in Ireland. I'm incredibly proud of what we've created in that long-term vision for change. But it also matters terribly to me that the whole team contributed and that we listened to the real priorities from people with asthma.

All of the highlights of my career have stemmed from working with teams, putting the work first – award-winning books, running political change campaigns, promoting STEM to young people. These projects have lifted me and have had a long-term positive impact on how I feel about myself.

### Who or what inspires you most in business?

I spoke to a woman with asthma recently with asthma attacks multiple times a week. She has two young children. I could hear the tremble in her voice. She needed help to know more about her asthma and was nervous about engaging with medical professionals. When I'm not sure about our direction or our support mix, I try and keep her top of mind and that inspires me.

People with asthma are powerfully inspirational. They take up fitness challenges, they go back to work or school, they get over things they've missed out on because of their health and they make things work for themselves. They get on with their lives – there's inspiration enough there for us all.

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

As a woman leading a team, I have a PhD in the Imposter Syndrome but show me a woman who doesn't. I'm confident in lots of ways but I have a streak of questioning myself that can be unhelpful. But I'm trying to use that as an advantage, to listen to my self-doubt and be properly considered about decisions. Alongside that, I'm also battling to let go and believe in my decisions.

My Dad used to say to me: "don't let anyone ever stop you from being as good as you are". At a particular point in my career, dealing with a challenging working relationship, I interpreted that as a call-to-arms. It was concerted and dogged excellence by sheer force of will to counter what came against me – I was showing them. Now, it's not about being good despite someone else's machinations. Having found a job I deeply care about, it's about finding the good parts of myself and maximising those for the good of the organisation.

### How do you unwind?

I've gotten better – I hope – at deciding what's a good day's work or week's work and switching off. If I'm thinking about work, I make sure it's the useful, creative kind of mulling and not the mind-killer worry kind.

I write poetry and fiction and as soon as I type even one sentence, work is powered off in my head.

Walking in Howth or the Glen of Aherlow work like a tonic for me. I have brilliant friends and I make time for them every week – let's pretend that's me being a good person, but in reality, I get so much from that time chatting and laughing. I go to the cinema almost every Sunday night for a switch-off before a Monday. There's nothing better than sitting with a pint of Guinness in Slattery's Pub in Rathmines with my boyfriend discussing the big and little bits of the day.

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