



HEALTH & MIND

MENTALLY challenging

SHE'S BEEN AT THE HELM OF A NATIONAL RADIO STATION AND HAS HELPED COMPANIES SUCH AS 'THE SUNDAY TRIBUNE' AND 98FM IN THE START-UP PHASE. NOW CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF INSPIRE IRELAND FOUNDATION ELAINE GERAGHTY TALKS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTAL HEALTH. CARMEL DOYLE REPORTS

While the question 'what is happiness?' has puzzled poets and philosophers since time began, in a business sense how important is it for owner managers to take into account their own mental health, as well as that of their employees?

With most organisations bubbling like pressure cookers at the moment – striving to stay afloat, to innovate and be ahead of the posse – people are under serious pressure, but mental health still remains a hazy issue often not talked about in companies.

Elaine Geraghty, former CEO of Newstalk, is one individual who has decided to channel her business acumen into the social-enterprise domain and, in doing so, aims to play an active role in "changing the conversation" about mental health.

Since stepping down from the helm of Newstalk in 2009, Geraghty has been involved in various pursuits such as lecturing and consulting small businesses, as well as taking some time out, and she is now dedicating her energy to a new social cause by becoming CEO of The Inspire Ireland Foundation.

Through its website Reachout.com and by honing in on their use of social networking, Inspire Ireland aims to help teenagers and young adults in the 16–25 age group lead happier lives.

As Geraghty explains: "Young people are the future of this country – in terms of management, leadership, politics and social change – and they're at their most vulnerable in that age bracket. Lots of them are in work situations where they're just starting out in their career. They're going through tough times as well and we need to manage that group carefully."

But back to leaders and the happiness quandary. According to Geraghty, anyone who finds the perfect position from the very start is "incredibly fortunate".

"I've done a number of different things and I've thoroughly enjoyed all of them along the way, but I think that eventually, at a certain stage in your life, you innately know: a) what you're good at, and b) what you enjoy. If you can get that balance right that's a really good place to be."

Having been involved in companies such as 98fm and *The*

Sunday Tribune when they were start-ups, Geraghty also has personal insight into the energies that have to be given to burgeoning enterprises.

"They [start-ups] are often the most exciting time in the life cycle of any business. The flip side, potentially, is they are often the busiest time and you've got to really immerse yourself, but I tend to look at it from a positive point of view."

Conversely, with established businesses, and the economic climate we're in now, Geraghty points to how mentally tough it can be for leaders to be creative and to come up with new ideas of generating revenue, as well as reducing costs.

So, from her experience at Newstalk, how lonely and challenging can it be at the pinnacle of an organisation?

"When you're leading an organisation everyone is looking to you. With that position comes that responsibility. What I would say is if you've got a good management team around you – that could be one or two people, or it could be five – that's hugely important.

"You also need to learn quickly to tap into their knowledge about staff who you mightn't get to see or talk to on a one-to-one basis during any given day because you're busy doing all the high-level strategy stuff. So, be smart about it and delegate. Listen to what your managers are saying about staff members if you don't get a chance to talk to them directly."

SEEK OUT A MENTOR

Her other pearls of wisdom to help owner managers and CEOs ease their workplace stress is to seek out a mentor or guardian angel.

"Sometimes we all need to check ourselves and say: 'I have a particular way I want to run the business and I'm not exactly sure about something'. It's absolutely okay to ask that because no one person has all the answers. As much as you've got a good strong team working around you and with you in terms of management, you also need someone who's going to listen and give an opinion and that helps."

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"It's tough on leaders time-wise and especially now when we're all under so much pressure. It's all about cutting costs and getting revenue wherever you can. In the middle of it, you've also got to mind yourself and all of the people you work with. Getting that balance right is difficult."

And while no one individual can ever have the total package, Geraghty says people should recognise where their strengths are, understand they need support and get the right people in who can give them that.

Also, because owner managers are being forced to make decisions rapidly, she says they must still try to find time for themselves each day.

"Sit down and evaluate things. If you don't look after yourself it follows that, by osmosis, it's going to affect every element of your business. It starts with you being in as good a shape as you can be. The funny thing is we always think about looking after ourselves physically before we think of the mental side."

SEE CHANGE CAMPAIGN

Ireland currently doesn't have a national campaign on mental health and the workplace, but that dialogue is in the process of changing, with a new anti-stigma initiative called See Change, which will be rolled out this year. Inspire Ireland has been asked to join as a partner in the initiative and Geraghty will be part of that representation, along with Inspire Ireland's programme director, Derek Chambers.

"We are already thinking about businesses and the whole area of mental health and destigmatising it. The phrase I would use is 'changing the conversation' around how we talk about mental health, how we view it and how we can turn it into a positive in terms of looking after people."

In the meantime, there are other avenues companies can follow to keep apace with mental health and the workplace. For instance, representatives from companies can participate in free training sessions about suicide prevention and awareness via programmes such as SafeTalk and ASIST, which are managed by the National Office for Suicide Prevention.

FROM THE OUTSIDE IN

A robust HR policy is also essential, adds Geraghty.

"You need to be in touch with what's going on with your staff. You need to try to recognise the signs early with somebody who is going through a tough time and you need the training in place to be able to handle that and also the training for the potential that this might go to the extreme with somebody."

She also encourages businesses to support any positive mental health and any anti-stigma initiative that comes out. "That can be done at a very low cost. It's not about investing huge amounts financially, it's about educating staff, picking up the literature and destigmatising the fact that we can actually all speak openly about these things in a different way."

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The information leaflet 'Look after your mental health in tough economic times' can be downloaded from the NOSP website, www.nosp.ie or ordered free of charge via www.healthpromotion.ie.

