

WMB Empowering Women 2013 – Margot Slattery – MD Sodexo Ireland

WORDS: LIV MORGAN



Margot Slattery

Sodexo Ireland's Managing Director Margot Slattery says she feels empowered regularly within her company. "I can make a lot of decisions about things we want to do. Even if it's just going a long to a conference like the WMB Conference & Awards. We've got limited budgets and it's tight but at least I can make decisions about those things. I feel empowered when I help somebody, for instance when I see a more junior person coming up the ranks or when I'm able to divide a certain amount of our cost or our spend in a way that actually facilitates the development of people."

Margot was instrumental in signing up Sodexo to Ireland's first Diversity Charter in October 2012. Sodexo introduced its Diversity and Inclusion programme in 2008. Having watched it evolve over the years she says: "What has happened is it started out like a little tree. So we got the roots right – making people understand what diversity really was. That was the first part, then to build on that the next phase was to get people to understand being inclusive – rolling out training and policy on how we behave in work. The next part of the evolution is around how we build on that interaction with our clients, our companies, NGOs and various organisations. It's an ongoing type growth."

It was on the basis of feedback from employees across the UK and Ireland that the Council decided to establish an employee network group specifically for women, Women Work. Margot immediately stepped forward to become the founding chair of the group. The aim of the Women Work network was and still is, to encourage a culture of inclusiveness by helping female employees to enhance their professional and personal growth. Over 300 members joined within two months of its launch and today the network has over 700 members.

Margot stresses why it was important to set up Sodexo Women's Network also: "I think like a lot of companies, well we're probably better than most, we only have 25 per cent representation of women now at board and senior level. The statistics were something that concerned our senior board in France and they wanted to be much higher than that. So they actually put an objective out for every country manager – in all of their briefs – to increase the level of women. So because there was a focus from there and from a group perspective it made every country look at what they did about gender to try and bring people onboard."

Most recently Margot developed a client and local community engagement event on the topic of gender and unconscious bias. On her objective for the event, she says: "I wanted people to think about how they might, whatever their role was, influence micro inequity; how can we make people feel unequal? For instance, just by the very nature of how we speak and behave can actually discourage people, from a gender perspective, to progress or want to stay in an organisation. So I wanted people to be aware, to think about some of the statistics

we have out there. Even in our own company where there's only 25 per cent, although it's higher than other companies, it's not right, it's less than a quarter. Why should we be happy with that?"

Margot comes at equality from both sides saying: "If the men in our company were only at 25 per cent they'd be kicking off and saying well there's something really wrong here. So when I go out into the wider world you can see there's a lot to do."

The biggest obstacle to inclusion within the corporate world is two pronged, according to Margot. "One is finance because companies pay a bit of lip service to it but they don't actually give people a budget. You need to train, you need to encourage, you need to bring in people. Then the second thing is about it being endorsed or being powered down from the top. If that doesn't happen you can employ someone, a middle manager, and give them the title of diversity and inclusion. But if they've got no empowerment from the top then I think it's pointless."

As for Ireland's stance as an inclusive country Margot believes it's not the worst but not a model of excellence either. "One of the things I would see in





L-R: Una O'Hare, iTronics and Margot Slattery, Sodexo Ireland.

business is it's still a world where there's a lot more naturally attuned to men. We talk about things like 'manpower'; words and language is still very male orientated. I think generally the business world suits men better; for instance the timings of things – nighttime events. I see my female colleagues aren't always free to attend those because they don't always have someone waiting at home to mind the baby or mind their mum. Of course I'm making generalisations here but I think Ireland has a long way to go to be honest. Corporate Ireland really needs to think about what it actually says and how it behaves."

Aside from women's networks, what is more taboo are Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) Networks. Margot sits on Sodexo's global LGB network leadership team: "They are lacking. I would say Sodexo's is good because we have some really brave people and I'm talking globally. We have lots of people from the States on it and that pushes it because they're more advanced. I certainly see even in the UK that it's a topic that people are less inclined to tackle. There are some wonderful organisations but they are very few."

Role models without a doubt have an intricate role to play, particularly for young women in the corporate world. Margot enthuses: "I think that young women are quite often coming up through an organisation at various levels and therefore your powerbase changes as you come up along. And

when your powerbase is at the lower end of things, when you're just starting off you can be very easily influenced to think that this is the way you have to behave... Or if someone pushes you on something – I've seen where young women are made to believe that they have to do certain things to get to the next stage.

"Whereas when they have positive role models and they see people have got here, whether they're male or female, and they're people who are really speaking about right behaviour and the way to behave, then I think it's important. It's like everything else – you want to see somebody who looks like you and represents your lifestyle as well."

Margot takes her own inspiration from her grandmother: "An amazing woman. She was a widow at a very young age, farming and brought up three daughters. She just had to do everything on her own and she was tough as nails, yet a wonderful mum who looked after everybody. I'm inspired by her hardwork at times when that wasn't easy." There are numerous women globally, however Margot says that Mary Robinson is very inspiring in Ireland.

There have been times when Margot says she didn't think she was going to get to the next level, that the pressure of senior roles was too much. Looking back now, her advice to the young women coming up the ranks behind her is **'Don't be afraid to follow your fear and put your head up, keep driving onwards and you'll find your way.'**