

Women deliver real leadership in a multibillion-pound industry



Michelle Wright, centre, has made a success of her Cause4 advisory business Bethany Clarke/The Times

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Last updated at 10:58AM, November 19 2013

For many, the stereotypical image of the not-for-profit sector is one of “do-gooding, canvas shoe-wearing, middle-aged women — and Michelle Wright hates it. How can it be true when leading British charities control £56 billion of assets and when they run essential services?

The 37-year-old is anything but a stereotype herself. After almost three years as development director at the London Symphony Orchestra, the former professional violinist set up on her own four years ago in a very different line of work. Her business, Cause4, advises charities on strategy and fundraising and has grown from two employees to thirty in only four years.

The charity sector is dominated by women, who make up 68 per cent of the workforce, and yet it is “shy” about shouting about its female leaders, Ms Wright believes. “This couldn’t be a better sector to show women in very strong leadership positions, but we just have to make more of it.”

The problem is, perhaps, deep-rooted. The rapid growth of her company has led Ms Wright to put in place a graduate trainee scheme, yet she has concerns about the lack of confidence displayed by many female graduates. “Too many female graduates seem spoon-fed to pass exams and even the very talented ones are not work-ready. I’m not seeing female graduates with the confidence to do something and the curiosity to find out more.

“I want to see our graduates become the next generation of leaders of charities and social enterprises, and training and mentoring is an essential part of that development.”

Cause4 started in 2009 with a turnover of £121,000. That has now reached £911,000 and it has raised almost £22.5 million for its charity clients in the community, sports and arts.

Anne O’Connor’s business, run with her husband Keith, is in a sector typically dominated by men, but this has been no impediment. Fleetsolve’s background was in the automotive world, where the company designed biofuel engines for buses, tractors, trucks and motor sport. Now it has moved into renewable energy by making, installing and operating combined heat and power units for commercial premises, including the first carbon-neutral supermarket for Tesco and Harrogate International Conference Centre.

“We have managed to get a good team of powerful women together who have been there from early days,” Ms O’Connor said. “Whether you are male or female, the most important thing is that you do what you say you are going to do.”

When the company is recruiting, its priority is to get the best person for the job, regardless of gender, from female administrative support staff to female engineers.

The business was founded in 2002 with no external funding. It has gone from turnover of a mere £46,000 then to turnover of £6.5 million today, with 15 big clients.

“Keith’s passion is engines and I was very involved with the dirty end of the business in the early days, too,” Ms O’Connor said. “When you tell people that you have your own business, they think that you’re out on the golf course the whole time. It’s quite the opposite.”

“Keith designed all the technology himself and, when we first installed the Combined Heat & Power [mini power stations], it was us out there at 3am responding to call outs to start with. So we really understand the challenges people face. In order to get a company like ours off the ground, you have to devote a lot of time to it. It is your life.”

• Top tips

Anne O’Connor’s tip: Always see the opportunity, even on the days when everything is going wrong. Believe in what you do and enjoy it

Michelle Wright’s tip: Learn from your peers. Whatever discipline you are in, people are having similar difficulties so learn from networking with other

entrepreneurs

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