



Leaning In in Ireland

YVONNE GORDON finds out how the Lean In philosophy is helping Irish women achieve their goals in the workplace

When Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook, wrote her first book, *Lean In: Women, Work And The Will To Lead* in 2013, it sold more than a million copies within six months. Since then, it has rarely been out of the bestseller lists and the Lean In philosophy has gone on to inspire more than 22,700 Lean In Circles in 110 countries around the globe.

Sandberg (45) had previously worked as VP of global online sales and operations at Google and before that, she was chief of staff at the US Secretary of the Treasury. During a TED talk she gave in 2010, she addressed the issue of how women were not making it to the top of any profession and the challenge that women face of balancing professional success and personal fulfilment.

"The laws of economics and many studies of diversity tell us that if we tapped the entire pool of human resources and talent, our collective performance would improve," writes Sandberg. "Legendary investor Warren Buffett has stated generously that one of the reasons for his great success was that he was competing with only half of the population."

In her talk, and then in the book, Sandberg also described how women unintentionally hold themselves back in their careers –

that in addition to the external barriers erected by society, women are often hindered by barriers within themselves, having lowered expectations and compromising career goals. "We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in," says Sandberg, who encourages women to "sit at the table", to take risks and to go after their goals.

One of the outcomes of the Lean In movement is Lean In Circles – small groups who meet regularly to learn and grow together, offering the power of peer support. "For women in particular, having the support of others can make a real difference, in part because we consistently underestimate our abilities," she says. "Research has shown that we are more confident, learn more and accomplish more when we work in small teams; everything from book clubs to professional organisations to health groups have demonstrated the effectiveness of peer mentorship."

There are Lean In circles throughout Ireland, where members work to help each other to build confidence and achieve goals, using group discussions and structured meetings (Lean In provides discussion material, videos and other resources) and 75 per cent of members credit the Circle with a positive change in their life.

Giustina Mizzoni, development leader with CoderDojo foundation, the global network of free computer programming clubs for young people is part of a Lean In Circle that meets regularly in Dublin. Giustina says as soon as the Lean In book came out, she embraced what Sandberg was saying. "I was just enthralled with it, everything she said resonated with me," she says.

Giustina (26, from Dublin) mentioned the book to Rebecca Kilbane, who she had worked with at Ashoka Ireland, and they decided to set up their own Lean In Circle. They both suggested three people they knew from different sectors but at similar stages in their careers and similar ages, who they thought would benefit from the Circle. Everyone read the book and the first meeting was in May 2013. Now the Circle meets around every four to six weeks, to discuss videos or pre-planned topics which they set before each meeting. Recently they read the book *Centred Leadership* by Joanna Barsh, for discussion at the Circle.

In her role with Coder Dojo, Giustina works with all the foundation's global partners. When she started the Lean In Circle, she had just moved into the job. "We were a really small team, there was only two or three of us. I didn't have a big team to bounce ideas off, we were a new start-up, so there was no plan in place," she says. "The Circle really helped me at that time. It was a safe space outside work and outside family. I was able to talk about work problems, bounce ideas and 'sense-check' things."

Giustina says the peer mentoring from the Circle has been hugely helpful. "We are all around the same age. We were all quite new to our careers. None of us had really found mentors in the working world at the time. I worked in the technology sector so there was not a huge amount of women around in my office. Having this circle of peer mentors, who weren't necessarily more experienced than me, I could learn from them and their experiences.

The benefits have already been tangible. "Over the last couple of years, three or four of us went on to ask for pay increases and we all got them. Also, people were going up for promotions and we all helped to support each other on that journey. There was another two girls going for new jobs, we did interview prep with them.

"It really helped me be more confident in my own ability in work, because I was quite young and on a small team and very often dealing with older people who had much more experience than me," says Giustina. "It helped me understand that it's not just about age and experience, it's about your competence and how you hold yourself and your ability."

Rebecca Kilbane, 25, from Co Meath, who set up the Lean In Circle with Giustina, is partnerships and fellowships manager at Ashoka Ireland, a Dublin-based company which identifies social entrepreneurs and help them scale their business. In her role in the global organisation's Irish office, she helps social entrepreneurs get ready to scale globally, providing them with resources such as strategy, accountancy and legal, also matching them with business mentors.

Rebecca also says the biggest factor from the Lean In Circle that has impacted her career is the peer support. "At the start of every circle, we share our monthly updates, our challenges and what we're most looking forward to. You're definitely inspired by everyone else in the



Left to right: Tess Brady, Emma Louise Leavey, Vicky Whelton, Giustina Mizzone, Sheryl Sandberg, Rebecca Kilbane, Ailbhe Magee, Pauline Farrelly.

group to move forward because everyone is facing similar challenges in their career. We're all at the same stage, so you don't feel as alone.

"We share stories about challenges," she says. "We don't offer advice – as part of Lean In you are not supposed to offer advice – but we share stories and that's quite powerful, it's definitely inspiring."

Rebecca says another benefit that Lean In has had for her career is encouraging her to take more risks. "You have a peer network there that you can evaluate your skills with. They are always supporting you and cheering you on, and if it goes wrong, it's a group you can share with and support you to keep going."

Rebecca says the Circle has also encouraged her to be a mentor for younger people. "I definitely place a strong emphasis on that and make sure that I'm always mentoring someone or if someone comes to me for advice. That's one of the ways to give back as well, it would have been something I would have wanted more of during college."

When Sheryl Sandberg came to Dublin in April of last year, to speak at the launch of her Lean In: For Graduates book, people asked Rebecca and Giustina how to get involved in Lean In. As well as encouraging others to start their own Lean In Circles, they started a quarterly event called Career Compass. The last event, which took place in Google, had 150 attendees.

"The whole idea is about creating opportunities for young professionals to learn from experts, but also from one another," says Giustina. "We have had two events which have been panels of really impressive people, and after that we had networking, I found that there's a loads of Meetup events, for different sectors but I hadn't come across an event where you can go and just talk about your career in a relaxed and informal setting, or talk about the challenges in your career. When you go to networking, people talk about how

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amazing their lives are and how amazing their jobs are. That's not reality."

Giustina says even if you're busy in your career, making time for a Lean In Circle will have huge rewards. "I've always been quite career-driven, and that's always been very important to me and that's not the same with a lot of my friends, so having this space where I can just talk about 'how do I get to the next step? How do I do this?' was really beneficial because I had never really had that before in a peer sense. It really taught me that it's okay to be career-driven, it's okay to want to be the best, but the importance of balance in everything, balance in work life. Even making time to come to the Circle was hard, but having a set time to reflect on your career and your life in a professional sense is important."

The growth of the Lean In movement sparked an initiative for men called Lean In together, to help men to promote gender equality in the home and in the workplace and to give tips to men for how to lean in too. Lean In also has a resource of management tips on its website – useful for both genders.

- To find out more about Lean In and setting up your own Lean In circle, see www.leanin.org. For information on the next Career Compass event in Dublin, see Career Compass on Facebook or follow @CCseries on Twitter.