



Women in Leadership Case Study

Collette Gallagher, Locality Reporter Manager

My journey into leadership started at a young age. Throughout my childhood I experienced a number of adverse experiences. This resulted in my brother and I being part of the children's hearings system. At times we had to be cared for by relatives, but on two occasions we had to be placed in foster care. The first time was when I was around ten. I was lucky because I had my brother with me, but I still felt sad, lonely and completely powerless. The second time was when I was around thirteen. This time I was older and was more able to participate in hearings. I instructed my own solicitor. My solicitor was someone who stood by me and made a lasting impact on me. She empowered me and allowed me to exercise my legal rights including appealing to the sheriff court. Although the sheriff didn't agree with my appeal, the fact that he acknowledged and listened to me made me feel more in control of what was happening.

Later on when I was around sixteen my mum became unwell again, but this time rather than foster carers I was taken in by two of my teachers. After securing the grades for university I decided to study law having been inspired by the solicitor I had as a young person in the care system. I wanted to use the law to help empower other people in the same way that I had felt empowered.

“Education was key for me in building resilience. It provided me with hope for a future where I would be in control. I knew to do this I needed to work hard and achieve.”

After graduating with a law degree from the University of Glasgow and Diploma in Legal Practice, I trained at a large commercial law firm before qualifying in August 2011.

“After qualifying I began to map out where I wanted to be in the short, medium and long term and to seek out opportunities to enable me to get there. This is something I have continued to do throughout my career and involves setting a goal and working back identifying where the gaps in your experience are and seeking out opportunities that will allow you to fill these gaps.”

I didn't feel I was able to fulfil my goal of empowering other people working in a commercial law firm and so after qualifying as a solicitor I went to work for a law firm that specialised in mental health law where I specialised in mental health tribunals. This gave me my first insight into tribunals and I decided that I wanted to become a legal member of a tribunal. To be a legal member of a tribunal you have to have at least 5 years post qualifying experience. I recognised that to give me the best chance of achieving my goal I needed to gain much broader civil litigation experience and so when an opportunity to cover a maternity leave post at a large law centre in Glasgow in a project supporting people with mental health and incapacity in all elements of civil law came up I took the risk of leaving my permanent job for a temporary contract.

After the completion of the maternity leave contract, I was offered a permanent post and spent the next 6 years of my career there all the time working towards my goal. I recognised that as well as experience in advocacy I would need experience in decision making and judgement writing to be appointed to a tribunal. I identified ways to obtain this experience. One was being appointed as a Curator ad litem for the Mental Health Tribunal for Scotland and another was to be appointed a Safeguarder at Glasgow Sheriff Court. Despite having been qualified for a much shorter time than others appointed to these roles, I was successful in securing these appointments because I had gained the respect of tribunal members and sheriffs in the areas I specialised in through the work I had done.

Through my work I represented a young person who was detained in hospital during referral proceedings. As I learnt more about the role of a reporter I realised that this would be the ideal job for me to be able to utilise my skills and childhood experience to make a real and lasting difference for children and young people. However this would mean leaving behind a career in mental health and incapacity law where I had worked so hard to build a career. It was a hard decision for me to make as I felt I had reached such a high level in my career.

“I had to weigh up the benefits and disadvantages of starting in a new area at this stage and whether it would negatively impact me achieving my goal of becoming a tribunal member. I decided overall that it was worth the risk acknowledging that sometimes you have to take a risk to push yourself on.”

Going through the interview process was difficult. I applied a total of four times before I was finally offered a position. Each time I would come out of the interview hopeful only to be let down time and time again. It dented my confidence and my belief in myself, but I had to remind myself each time of all that I had achieved in my life and career. I was at the stage where I was about to move on from this goal and re-route my map but on the final attempt I finally got a phone call offering me a position but not the permanent one I had applied for, instead a six month temporary contract. Again I took a risk and it paid off when a year later I was successful in getting a permanent Reporter post.

“When you put yourself out there in trying to develop yourself you are going to have knock backs and disappointments but you need to regroup and move forward taking any learning you can with you.”

Not long after I started my role at SCRA the Health and Education chamber of the First Tier Tribunal for Scotland went through a recruitment process. It was not the best timing with my new role but I couldn't let an opportunity like this pass me by when I had been working towards this goal for so long. In January 2018 I was appointed to the First Tier Tribunal for Scotland as a legal member of the Health and Education Chamber. This was a really significant achievement for me because out of seventy applicants I was one of only four legal members appointed.

“To reach your goals you have to be determined to succeed. You have to set your goal and identify what experience you need to qualify you for where you want to get to. Although you have to do this for yourself there will be people you meet along your journey who will inspire and support you.”

My role as a tribunal member has allowed me to develop my leadership skills which assisted me when I applied for a temporary Locality Reporter Manager (LRM)



position. I was able to demonstrate that I met the competencies for this role despite not having traditional management experience within SCRA and since July 2020 I have acted as an LRM within Glasgow.

From the solicitor that supported me through my hearings experience, to my colleagues in the law centre, I have been supported by inspirational women. SCRA's Women into Leadership network is a powerful group of women who support one another within the organisation. Through being part of this, I have tried to give back by supporting other women to develop their careers. It is clear that many women within the organisation are frustrated by a lack of opportunities as there is a relatively stable workforce with little turnover in traditional leadership roles, but the experience you gain outside of SCRA is just as valuable for your development as the experience you gain within SCRA.

