

DIVERSITY

A publication by Neela Bettridge Ltd

Diversity is not just the “right” thing to do

Do you have any lingering doubts about the value of diversity? Is there a little bit of you that thinks “I’ll play along for now but no doubt the tried-and-tested HR ways will be back before too long”? Then how about [this story](#)?

I can’t speak for any of the individuals surveyed (though I’d love to speak to them) but I suspect that what most of those employees recognise is that the old way of doing things was just plain rotten to the core. At a human level, inclusivity just feels right in the gut.

But as I have pointed out time and again, it’s also really very good for business. You’re guaranteed a greater level of innovation, you’ll find a richer variety of skillsets presenting at interview and you’ll avoid alienating potential customers and clients.

When Uber’s investors called for Kalanick to go, it wasn’t – it appears – for reasons of compassion to those hurt by the culture he was responsible for. It is because they feared that Uber’s fares would start drying up.

Diversity isn't a cure-all

There is resistance to diversity. Even amongst those who claim to support it. The comforting pull of the status quo is just too great. No matter that, in this case, what is comforting to the individual is actually suffocating to business.

And while the situation exists as it currently does, with only seven FTSE 100 companies headed by a female CEO and an even more dismaying picture at the level of ethnicity, that resistance is not going to dissipate anytime soon.

One thing we can do to push back against those [who see diversity training as so much snake oil](#) or a misguided onslaught of political correctness is to admit its faults. After all, backing diversity unreservedly is blinkered thinking – the kind of thinking that diversity is supposed to disrupt. So here goes.

Diversity can hold up consensus

While diversity is absolute rocket fuel to creative thinking and problem-solving, it can be a drag on consensus. As diversity becomes the norm rather than the exciting new exception, we can expect, of course, that leaders will find ways to smooth some of those rough edges.

There is such a thing as too much diversity

The success of diversity seems to fly in the face of the old adage that “too many cooks spoil the broth”. Doesn't diversity just make your broth irresistible? Well, yes – within reason. The chefs must at least be able to understand each other on a basic level, and share a kitchen without knives

flying.

There is such a thing as the wrong kind of diversity

The term “diversity” has such visual connotations, it’s easy to focus on superficial signifiers – ethnicity, gender, age. But these are indications of the possible diversity within. It’s the inner, deep-level diversity that leads to business benefits. Roll out diversity initiatives at recruitment stage with insufficient finesse and you’ll end up with people who look and sound very different – superficial diversity – but with same-old-same-old thinking.

Resisting bias in matters of diversity

Leaders need to be strong in such a wonderfully wide variety of ways. One is the strength to believe in the unknown and unfamiliar. To look beyond discomfort when faced with a personality that has formed in a different way to our own and instead home in on its brilliant potential.

Clearing bias and achieving clear-sightedness around diversity takes focussed mindfulness – and that in turn takes practice. Here are some ways we can help ourselves while it doesn't come so easily.

Think “breakthrough solutions”

Teams with diverse backgrounds and personalities simply have a bigger arsenal when it comes to problem-solving and strategy-formulating. When bias gets in the way of your openness to diversity, try thinking “breakthrough solutions”. That's the prize that diversity offers.

Disrupt hierarchy

Discomfort around diversity is part of a bigger picture. In fact, it's part of the really big one: the one where we simply don't like change. Sticking to hierarchical structures – aka the status quo – is another way we avoid change in the realm of workplace communication. So mix it up. Invite input and feedback on a regular basis from those you outrank. Actively choosing to disrupt the status quo yourself will make it easier when the impact of diversity takes change out of your hands!

Institutionalize diversity

Work the promotion of diversity into your business' scripture. Make sure it is a dynamic topic at recruitment stage (not just a box for candidates to tick) and that it informs and energizes training practices.

Leadership in the face of diversity

I've said before that I think there is such a thing as "too much" diversity. Of course, semantics come into play here but still, it's true that diversity can cause creaks and creases. Here are a few things to bear in mind, plus some tips on how to deal with issues when they arise.

Be prepared to act as peacemaker

A "diverse" workforce, in simple terms, is made up of a greater variety of different personalities (intellectual and emotional) and cultural outlooks than was the norm in the workplaces of previous generations.

That can translate into social tension: why do you think the opposite of diversity happened in the first place? One reason is that it makes for an easier life! Embracing diversity means inviting social complexity, so be prepared to act as peacemaker more than you used to.

Know when diverse teams need more or less leadership

Is the team brainstorming? Great! This is what a diverse workforce excels at, for reasons [I've already made plain](#). If diversity had a brochure, a brainstorming team would probably be on the front.

It's the next stage you really need to keep an eye on. The social tensions and incompatibilities inherent in diverse teams can mean that agreeing on a way to proceed and action those brilliant ideas is problematic. Particularly when the ideas themselves are diverse. Get ready to do some steering.

Help locate common ground

Conceived with vision, an internal social network is an excellent way to foster cohesion in diverse teams. Don't scrimp when it comes to commissioning and maintaining yours.

The theory and practice of diversity

In [this article](#) for the Guardian, Joseph Harker makes lots of insightful points about the idea of workplace diversity as an idea or goal versus the putting-into-practice of workplace diversity.

He brings up an idea that I've mentioned in previous blogs: diversity in the workforce is simply good for business; a workforce that represents the diversity of the world around us has a direct relationship to how many potential customers our business appeals to.

The writer makes a good illustration of this point. On the face of it, he says, an Oxford graduate with a First would seem a better candidate for a job than a graduate from a former polytechnic with a Second class degree. But what, he asks, if the job is in Sales, which calls for so many more qualities than academic bookishness – the former polytechnic candidate might be far more suited to the role.

For me, this is about how we conceptualize diversity. I think many still think of it as being about ethnicity. What happens when we hear “diversity” is that our brains go whoosh towards notions of ethnicity. Diversity is not that. It's about recognising the value in a wider range of life experiences and skills. Valuable life experiences and skills that our long-established academic nets do not necessarily capture – or disregard as bycatch – but which, as far as business is concerned, are high-grade lobster and caviar! We must not let a

preoccupation with ethnicity – or any superficial appearance – blind us to what diversity is really about and can actually achieve. It is about workforce inclusivity as much as diversity.

Mental health and gender narratives

[This article](#) on mental health in the workplace presents a real flurry of statistics collected by the mental health charity Mind. It describes how men are slightly less likely to take time off work for mental ill health and, equally, slightly less likely to feel their “company’s culture” makes it possible to speak about psychological issues.

I was then struck by this quote from Mind’s head of workplace wellbeing, Emma Mamo:

“Many men work in industries where a macho culture prevails or where a competitive environment may exist, which prevents them from feeling able to be open.”

Meanwhile, another expert cited in the piece, Cary Cooper of Manchester Business School and president of the CIPD (the professional body for human resources), is quoted as saying that men “still get their main identity from their job”.

I’d argue that women also work within the “macho culture” sphere of influence – indeed, could that have anything to do with why they’re more likely to take time off work for mental ill health, I wonder? It’s not difficult to imagine how a macho culture exacerbates workplace stress and anxiety. Oh and women also work in a “competitive environment”. And as for this implication that so few women “get their main identity from their job” that

it's a negligible consideration...

Now, I'm not saying that men and women are alike in every respect, but I do think it's noteworthy that, in a piece written from a position of insightfulness into the human condition (it being about workplace wellbeing and how we can improve it) that such sweeping, black-and-white gender observations should feature. It's a reminder that backward and forward steps really can be taken simultaneously.

The surprising way one woman is promoting gender diversity

Jeanine Prime of [Catalyst](#) is a writer I've only recently got acquainted with, but I find her experience in diversity worth reflecting on. Much of her work seems to focus on ways to [engage men in the promotion of gender diversity](#) and what I find especially striking about her approach is that it's so direct and so unapologetic in asking this of men.

Seeing this approach described so plainly brought something up in me: I instinctively felt that many women would shy away from directly giving guidance to men on how to contribute positively to this situation. And that made me wonder where this thought came from!

I concluded that one big reason is that doing so might feel to some like a kind of admission that the power is men's, as if asking this of men is like going to them cap in hand. Some women, I suspect, would only view improvements in gender equality as valid if that improvement has somehow be traced exclusively to the work of other women, with as little input from men as possible.

Or perhaps at play here is a holding on to the sense that the search for gender equality is a 'struggle', that women must somehow wrestle power from men, not ask for them to be so kind as to share it.

But I'd say that both of these positions – while understandable – are wrongheaded. Excluding men from the conversation comes from a place of insecurity – acknowledging that men have been in a privileged position for a very long time is in no way an admission that this privileged position has been justified.

And asking men for their collaboration in the process is not an admission of some inherent female weakness – the very nonsensical type of weakness to which certain people might be inclined to explain women's less elevated status.

Asking men to get involved, like Jeanine Prime is doing, is an empowered, confident act. Do you agree? This is one I've thought long and hard about lately and I'd love to hear your thoughts!

The leadership potential of immigrants

So it looks as if Donald Trump's travel ban is [gaining some legal traction](#). For some, this is going to represent a triumph of strong leadership: the President has remained steadfast, rejected all the negative PR and legal resistance as so much hot air, and seen his vision through. Others will see this as a general strengthening of the US – as much as the ban is presented as being about safety, there are those in the US who equate immigrants with scroungers, sapping the country of its resources. And not just in the US – around the world, nationalism is being expressed as isolationism, immigration identified as a major cause of strife and weakness.

Do you know what it takes to move your entire life to another country? To uproot your family and make a new start somewhere with a different language and culture? To integrate into that country while remaining true to your own older identity and traditions?

Strong leadership, that's what.

Whatever your view on the overall benefits of the travel ban, one thing's for sure: the President's opposition to diversity is denying his country some strong new leaders, leaders who might have gone on to do great things in the name of the Stars and Stripes. From the Pilgrims on the Mayflower to [more](#)

[recent success stories](#), the US is built on immigration. Safety? Stalling and stagnation might be the price to pay.



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