



Trending Diversity and Equality: Real Change or Empty Gestures

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How often do we look back on the most ground breaking periods in our lives and appreciate what this meant and how this shaped us into the people we are today?

Being the First

Twenty-five years ago, being the first black person to take on a position within an organisation, I incredibly didn't really think too much about it. My focus and commitment lay in supporting individuals who were deeply vulnerable and in need. Although I knew I was good I also knew I had much to learn and this was a great opportunity. I have to smile at how very naive I was

Very early on in my career someone took a chance on me. This was one of my most challenging experiences, moving me now to question its significance

today. Ultimately through this I learnt, bonded and grew immensely, turning out to be both one of the most difficult and rewarding times in my life

Confronting the Naysayers

At this time many people within this organisation clearly wanted to see me fail, making attempts to continually discourage, dismiss and undermine me. I was constantly confronted with people who openly did not respect or accept me. Fortunately, I was guided by a manager and team members who were hugely talented and supportive

Is Equality and Diversity Really Being Served?

Now with the glaringly obvious trend of black people and woman being the first to be appointed historical positions in organisations, it begs the question does this significantly change anything? For me this occurred many years ago and from my perspective we haven't moved on that much. You could say this trend is a positive sign of change. However, this actually means very little particularly if it is not backed by genuine and concerted efforts to establish a lasting and fundamental shift

So, what are some of the barriers, that stand in the way of achieving a significant move toward greater equality, diversity and inclusion and how can these be overcome?

Diversity & Inclusion is more than Skin Deep

A major issue is that many people and organisations have failed to understand that Equality and an effective Diversity and Inclusion Strategy for women and people from diverse backgrounds is more than mere “Tokenism”, or a marketing or publicity move. As the only black employee, I was asked to pose in marketing material and take part in an interview on racism. It is fair to say that actions such as these are reflected in many organisations. This is not only misleading and empty, it does absolutely nothing to establish real development or representation

Empty Promises

Unfortunately, despite their public declarations and image, the Equal Opportunity Policies and Diversity and Inclusion Strategies of many

organisations fail. Stronger commitment is needed in the implementation of effective practices, in order to achieve significant goals and lasting change

Pushing People Power

Genuine and meaningful progress towards greater equality is instigated by appointing women and people from diverse backgrounds, with authority and influence at all levels, not solely at the top. This involves having the control over decisions, which have a powerful and meaningful impact. Without this little change is possible.

It was many years later that I was given the chance to advance to a management level, in which I should have potentially been able to have significant influence. However still being in a small minority, with no real will, ethos, investment or support within the organisation, this would have been pointless and a waste of time. In this case it was a no-brainer to decline the opportunity

Hail the Courageous Leaders

I was both fortunate enough and inspired to have had a manager with the strength, courage and conviction to go against the status quo, in supporting my ability and potential.

Leaders not only need to be courageous; they also have to be the willing voice and face in promoting equality. Ensuring that this is an active and permanent priority in their vision and agenda. Without strong and committed leadership the road to equality and greater diversity is a long, slow and arduous one

You Will Be Assimilated

Believe it or not there also exists the misconstrued belief and strategy that diversity and inclusion is about integration or assimilation. This perspective focuses on acknowledging the factors of difference, however expects everything else to be the same. Although this approach openly expresses the recognition of differences, it then seeks to make women and people from diverse backgrounds appear, act and think, as much as possible like the majority or dominant culture. This is a senseless contradiction, since it is due

to these particular differences and how they impact the way we appear, feel, think, behave and experience the world, which reflects the true meaning and value of diversity. The focus then needs to be on the recognition and utilisation of the huge benefits of diversity, rather than the minimalization of difference

Doing what it Takes

Without a doubt developing more balanced and diverse cultures requires strong commitment and investment. This needs to cover a wide spectrum:

1. **Recruitment:** If businesses are serious about diversity and want to be truly inclusive recruiting talented people, from diverse backgrounds who have something different to offer brings greater balance and genuine diversity. Businesses, which continue to seek people who represent the sameness or status quo of their organisation have lost before they have even begun

The recruitment process itself is fraught with obstacles, which throw recruiters off. Addressing the influence of prejudice, bias and the demand to

fulfil quotas can be partially met through developed awareness and appropriate strategies. Along with this careful consideration needs to be given to recruitment sources, selection and assessment procedures

2. **Strong Structures:** Organisations wanting to develop equality and diversity can create a map through the implementation of effective policies and procedures. Providing information and strategies offers clear guidelines and appropriate actions for promoting behaviour and a work culture, in which people know what is acceptable and how things are done
3. **The Need to Give:** Investing in the Professional Growth of women and diverse groups, through the presence of continuous opportunities for learning and advancement, is essential in creating a more “level playing field”. Regular and targeted training, which is supported by person centred strategies, such as; mentoring and coaching can be highly effective in achieving desired goals
4. **Engagement is Key:** Within society and organisations people require the platform and the voice to express their needs and perspectives. This has to

be actively heard and responded to constructively. In this way businesses fostering engagement and encouraging a genuine sense of belonging can support the drive in redressing the balance towards greater equality and diversity

Despite being in an adverse environment I was able to thrive. Having a solid structure, direct guidance, on-going training, support and care from a dedicated manager and team offered me constant chances to develop my potential

No Holding me Back

I thrive on a challenge, my personality pushes me to constructively face obstacles, be persistent, strive to achieve the best, support and co-operate with others, play to my strengths, continually learn and find positive ways to move forward. I deeply appreciate the skills, confidence, knowledge, insight, awareness and experience, that I have gained, through being confronted by forces which were both for me and against me

How I chose to respond ultimately determined how much I personally and professionally achieved. The struggle, that I faced involved obstacles of “inequality” in society, which hold people back when in fact our diversity should be bringing us together

Realistically we still have a long way to go yet



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