

Creating an inclusive work environment

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When teaching MBA students, Stephen Frost, a Diversity & Inclusion specialist, uses a revealing exercise. He asks them to arm-wrestle with a partner and see how many wins they can achieve in a minute. Most fight it out, scoring one or two points at most, and tiring themselves out in the process.

But a small minority, usually women, score as many as 30 or 40 points. That's because they've realised they can achieve far more by cooperating and taking turns to let their opponent win, than by self-interested competition.

It is a vivid illustration of how businesses can be more successful by focusing on creating inclusive work environments where people collaborate for a common cause, rather than by rewarding “me-first” behaviour, as many still do.

It's good to see inclusion becoming a buzzword in business. A new report from the CBI, the lobby organisation for big British companies, says leaders must make inclusion a business priority because this will create better economic and social outcomes.

There's growing research evidence that inclusion is good for business. *Inclusion Matters*, a study by Catalyst, found that the more included employees feel, the more innovative they report being in their jobs. Employees also say they engage more in “team citizenship behaviors”, meaning they go beyond the call of duty to help other members and meet team objectives.

Another study, by Deloitte Australia*, found a strong relationship between feeling confident and safe to speak up and feeling inspired “to do my best work”. In addition, the more included employees feel, the more likely they are to be at work - reducing the cost of absenteeism - and to receive a higher performance rating.

The focus now is on *how* to create and sustain inclusive work environments. There's no shortage of ideas. The CBI report, *Time for Action: the Business Case for Inclusive Workplaces*, includes case studies. Stephen Frost and Danny Kalman's new book, *Inclusive Talent Management*, is packed with examples. Panellists at a recent IWE seminar on *Inclusion: Achieving a Win-Win for Individuals and Business*, also shared some moving stories.

Here are just a few ideas, covering key experiences at work:

Recruitment

Subconscious biases are inevitably present in recruitment and promotion. Changing the language in job adverts is a small but important step to greater inclusion. Job descriptions that focus on skills and competencies, rather than education or work experience, widen the pool of candidates, especially for entry-level roles.

“Name-blind” recruitment is gaining popularity as a way to overcome bias. The CBI says one in five female jobseekers from ethnic minorities change their name on job applications because they think they are less likely to be hired if they use their real one. Organisations that have publicly committed to name-blind recruitment include the BBC, KPMG and HSBC. Applicants' names can be disregarded through a number of stages if the recruitment process is long. In a shorter process, they can be removed from CVs before these are assessed.

Who gets heard?

It's often the loudest people who get promoted fastest, although Susan Cain, author of *Quiet*, says “there's zero correlation between the gift of the gab and good ideas”. To build success based on inclusion, managers need to listen to the quiet voices that may have something different and valuable to say. That means encouraging those people to contribute in a way that works for them.

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Sacha Romanovitch, CEO of accountancy firm Grant Thornton, takes the time to learn about individual personalities beyond their role and deliberately includes “out-groups”, say Frost and Kalman in their book. “To encourage ideas and hear from the 'quiet voices', Sacha has introduced an online platform on which people are encouraged to share their views.” Over 500 solid ideas have emerged, including a way of pooling the buying power of SME clients to gain bigger discounts.

The quiet voices are not only those of direct colleagues. What about the cleaners, receptionists, or repair workers who service corporate offices? Do your company's inclusion policies extend to them? How often is their role acknowledged? Are they treated as equals, or as lesser mortals? An organization cannot be serious about inclusion if it leaves these people out.

Flexibility

There's a campaign in the UK called [Hire Me My Way](#) to encourage employers to recruit people on flexible terms. According to the CBI, over half of employers offer flexible working but it is mentioned in less than one in 10 job adverts. Making flexibility standard would be a major step that companies could take to open doors to a far bigger talent pool.

At the IWE seminar, Andi Britt, head of IBM's European Talent and Engagement practice, spoke of countering managers' risk aversion about new ways of working by actively celebrating successful role models with non-standard working patterns.

Britt himself has worked for IBM for 20 years on a four-day week, enabling him to spend time on another of his passions, running a food bank and youth employment charity in London. His unusual work style was featured in the *Timewise* inaugural "Power Part Time" list, published in the *Financial Times*.

What messages do leaders send?

The CBI notes that inclusion requires cultural change and that this is likely to have stronger roots if people at every level of seniority take responsibility.

At Mercer, the professional services firm, the UK Leadership Team meets separately every quarter as the Diversity and Inclusion Council and each Board meeting covers D&I. The top team is accountable for progress against its 2020 target for women to comprise 30% of senior management, and for people from ethnic minority backgrounds to account for 20% of employees.

The CBI also cites John Lewis's "Bring Yourself to Work" week, a campaign demonstrating how diversity and inclusion affect everyone. Senior partners talk about what aspect of their background drove their commitment to inclusion, and colleagues explain their experience of diversity in the workplace.

As the IWE event also highlighted, sharing stories of exclusion and inclusion, as well as hard data on the business case, are powerful ways to convince people and drive change.

**Waiter, is that inclusion in my soup? A new recipe to improve business performance. Deloitte Australia.*

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