

# Rethinking Diversity and Inclusion

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At an event I was facilitating recently, I asked the audience who had responsibility for achieving gender-balanced leadership in their organisations. Was it the CEO? A small number of hands went up. Was it a relatively junior person in HR? More hands went up. What about the other companies present? The answer was that no one was responsible.

Businesses are at very different stages of maturity on Diversity & Inclusion (D&I). Those furthest ahead have senior leaders on board and driving change. Some are barely at the starting block. Others have downgraded D&I responsibility in recent years, cutting resources and reassigning responsibility to HR while failing to equip people with the skills needed to lead change.

Perhaps we should be dismayed that some organisations do not yet have anyone taking care of D&I. But we could reframe this as a great opportunity for them to gain an advantage - assuming they decide to get serious about D&I - by making it the responsibility of *every* leader from the start.

For 20 years now, business has had initiatives to increase the mix of gender, nationalities, and ethnic minorities in leadership, and, latterly, widening the focus to LGBT and disability. But the results have been far from sparkling.

McKinsey found in its research for its *Women Matter: Making the Breakthrough* report in 2012 that two-thirds of companies were investing in diversity but had as yet seen no impact. These companies had between 10 and 20 initiatives in place but fewer than 20% of women in top roles. Many companies expressed frustration at the slow pace of change, despite the effort going in.

I've written extensively about what more is needed, namely:

- Unfailing and visible commitment and conviction from senior leaders
- Measurement and reporting to track progress and keep managers accountable

- Uncovering and addressing unconscious biases

- Freeing people from unnecessary constraints, such as outmoded work

patterns, so they can achieve their objectives and potential

But I think that D&I itself also needs a radical rethink to become more effective. Here are my observations on what has gone wrong, and how to improve it.

### **1. D&I has become too complex**

D&I practitioners spend so much time and effort on initiatives that they can lose sight of the big picture of where the organization should be heading. The terminology of D&I can be a turn-off. I've heard D&I practitioners say that people in their organisations do not really know what “inclusion” means. While the work may be intricate, the messages need to be simple and relevant to everyone. The London 2012 Olympics was “the most diverse Games there has ever been”, according to Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Stephen Frost, head of diversity and inclusion for London 2012, explains in his book *The Inclusion Imperative* how the Games had the simple but effective slogan: “Everyone's 2012”. Stephen, now head of D&I at KPMG, argues that real inclusion is about making things easier. “Instead of additional programmes, with associated additional costs,” he writes, “it is about removal of barriers to allow a more efficient functioning of the market for talent.”

### **2. D&I has become elitist**

The D&I movement grew out of the fight for equality at work. Yet the “equality” part seems to have been lost in recent years, as initiatives focus increasingly and often exclusively on so-called “top talent”. This creates a serious long-term pipeline problem, because talent has to start somewhere, and that is clearly not at the top. Companies are gradually waking up to the fact that their recruitment processes are often elitist, focusing on the same schools and universities and reproducing leaders from the same minority pool of privileged people with a similar world view. This perpetuates the danger of “groupthink”. A few businesses are starting to investigate how to recruit and promote more people from a broader socio-economic mix, but these initiatives are still small. Without more active intervention, companies will become increasingly cut off from wider society, jeopardising their “licence to operate”.

### **3. D&I is not innovative enough**

This is linked to my previous point. There is an inherent conflict in the D&I role: the practitioner must challenge established norms and drive change, but

also has to work with people and functions in the organisation. Not surprisingly, it is difficult not to become caught up in established processes and ways of thinking. But for D&I to be an effective agent of change, practitioners need to become more innovative. That may mean stepping out for a while and refreshing their ideas, inspiration and drive. It may mean hiring a greater mix of people into the role, and hiring people with a track record for creativity and the ability to challenge power. Huge social, economic and political changes are sweeping the world. D&I professionals need to be hyper-aware of these changes, sensing the future and holding up a beacon for others to follow.

#### **4. D&I needs to lead change by everyone**

In his book, Stephen Frost describes introducing a Leadership Pledge, which everyone could sign, committing them to help deliver a memorable Olympic Games with a lasting legacy and to take personal responsibility for an inclusive approach that was fully integrated into every business decision. It was voluntary and open, and people displayed it on their desks. He says it was so successful with paid staff that it was extended to the 70,000 Games Makers volunteers.

Most people who work in D&I are passionate about making positive change. That passion can be eroded by the demands of the job and the difficulty of working against the grain of an established corporate culture. Excuses start to mount about why things are not progressing – leaders aren't on board, budgets are being cut, restructuring has shifted priorities. It takes courageous leadership to carry on, but that is crucial to the role. D&I people are not functionaries. Their role is to inspire others to get on board and lead change. They need to demonstrate the kind of leadership they want through their own behaviour and actions.

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