

## Equality & Diversity – The Death of Business or an Opportunity?

Given the amount of time we seem to spend filling in forms nowadays, you might be forgiven for thinking that the latest Equality and Diversity measures being introduced by the Government are a serious attempt to ensure that business is not able to compete in the European arena, and certainly not on the world stage. After all, the maternity leave rules are already crippling the NHS with Ward Managers spending so much time filling in forms and juggling the budget that there are rarely seen on the ward. So the latest initiative is surely designed to ensure that managers spend so much time working out what they can and cannot do, can and cannot say that they'll have no time to manage their teams, and certainly not have time to make any money! Well at first glance you might have a point. There certainly seems to be so much red tape to fill in and so many hoops to jump through that the thought of more is enough to make us pack up and go home.

But consider the alternative view. A manager or leader of a business has to find a way of releasing the potential of all of his employees so that they can deliver the best possible product/service to customers at the best possible price so that the business can make a good profit and be sustainable over time. I doubt few would argue with that, but how to do it – that is the \$64,000 question. Well one way *not* to do it is to limit the employees to what we can do as individuals. In the distant mists of time when I first became a leader in an organisation, there was an unwritten rule that I should never ask any of my team to do anything I wasn't both prepared and capable of doing myself – after all I was their boss. There's probably still a few leaders who operate that way, but consider the impact of that approach. My first leadership role meant that I was responsible for 30 people, many of whom had significantly more experience than I (as the new kid on the block) had. So what the unwritten rule was actually encouraging me to do was to limit the total output and capability of 30 people to my capability! Thankfully I had a wise and experienced number two who made it very clear to me what the impact of that approach would be, and spelt out in words of one syllable that my job was to provide a broad direction and that he and the rest of the team would deliver!

In a similar vein, when I first started, it was common practice to follow Theory X/Theory Y thinking. For those not entirely au fait with Douglas McGregor's 1960 model, he suggested that Theory X people simply want to do the minimum at work and therefore managers have to put policies and procedures in place to ensure that they do work, while Theory Y people want to work and therefore Managers have to release them to deliver. Unfortunately I don't think he explained how to identify which is which, and how you can differentiate between the two at work (which would as Kate has explained be discriminatory anyway!). Personally I prefer the Randy McGurk approach. Randy runs a chain of fast food restaurants in the South West of the USA, and in looking at his team of cooks, waiters, cleaners etc, he reasoned that 98% of them probably wanted to do an honest day's work and be paid for doing so. Why then should he then put his organisational policies and procedures together so that he focused on preventing the 2% from skiving (he called it the 2% jerk factor) rather than focusing on empowering the 98% who wanted to work.

I would argue that part of our reluctance to accept the Government initiative on Equality and Diversity is down to our natural connection with Randy McGurk. We run our own businesses or are responsible for part of one and we resent some nameless, faceless mandarin telling us how to do it, particularly if (as we suspect) they've never had to run a business themselves! So who are they to interfere? But let's step back from that premise (however much it might feel right) and look at how we make decisions in life. We are attracted to those who think and seem to be like us. There's an immediate connection with them that makes life easy and comfortable. So the natural result of that is to hire people like us, and in the workplace, to have an easier relationship with them. We will turn to them for advice, involve them more in decision making, value their thoughts more – and as a result will subconsciously discriminate against others. Not deliberately of course, but we will.

Now consider our prime responsibility as leaders, which is to make our selves redundant. Yes I am being serious. Our role is to surround ourselves with talented people who bring different dimensions to our team(s) who will then challenge what we and the teams do, the way we do it, and the way we manage our customers. By doing so, they continually challenge our

assumptions which makes us grow and develop – individually and collectively. When one of the team has the right credentials to take over from us, we have the opportunity to move on to our next challenge. In effect we have created and developed our own successor and made ourselves redundant. But that will only happen if we consciously look for **different** people, not pale imitations of ourselves. But as our natural tendency is to connect with like minded people, unless we consciously look for difference – for diversity – and then treat everyone in the team equally, we will not naturally make this happen. So that means we have to have in place a policy that consciously looks for people who are of different gender, might have a different view of the world, and set them free (within boundaries of course!) to challenge everything and everyone. That's not going to be comfortable for us and unless there is some formal protocol, our natural human tendency will be to revert to our comfort zone.

Most of us are familiar with differences highlighted through such tools as MBTI, 16PF, FIRO-B and so on, and indeed may use them in recruitment processes. They highlight that people do think and act in different ways and are all useful reference points for us. What they don't help with though are the different views of the world that we have, and the way that those different views drive us. Because the way we see the world makes sense to us, it is easy to assume that others should see it in a similar way. However we are driven by different perspectives that are the result of our age, gender, upbringing, experiences (good and bad), sexual orientation, our internal meta-programmes – indeed by many factors

Let me give you an example. Many of us who lead in business will be from the “Baby Boomers” era. So for us:

- The post war world is still relevant
- Hierarchy is still our frame of reference
- Loyalty to organisations
- We have a high work ethic
- Spending time in a company/position is still the norm
- Success = provision for family
- Our “catchword” is likely to be teamwork.

Interestingly, we assume that others have the same view so we will tend to think that others measure success in a similar way, and also think that they should “pay their due” in promotional terms and work their way through the company.

Now consider the younger generation – our potential successors to lead the business. They are Generations X & Y (the latter are sometimes known as The New Millennials). Generation X are the latch key children and they are characterised by:

- Lack of trust in authority
- Tenuous loyalty to organisation
- Strong loyalty to people
- Me centric
- Work = output
- Success = lifestyle
- Catchword - change

So far as Generation Y is concerned, their view of the world is even more radical – well to us Baby Boomers that is! They view the world as follows:

- Landing on the moon = history!
- Technology is part of their DNA
- **NO** loyalty to organisation
- Values and being valued
- Always looking for different options
- Work = funding of hobbies
- Catchword - networking

So you can see how different our views are likely to be simply because of a generational difference. Add gender, upbringing etc into the equation and you have the recipe for complete misunderstanding on the one hand, and a reversion to type with people naturally retreating into their "camp" on the other.

So where does that leave us? Back to my earlier my assertion that a leader's prime responsibility has to find a way of releasing the potential of all of his employees so that they can deliver the best possible product/service to customers at the best possible price so that the business can make a good profit and be sustainable over time. They certainly won't do that by surrounding themselves with clones and people who think and feel and act in their way. They need to surround themselves with talented and different people – hence the need consciously to look for and celebrate diversity, and to ensure that everyone in the organisation is treated fairly regardless of the views that they hold. If every organisation and every employee did that as a matter of course, there'd be no need for any governmental interference, but we know that isn't the case.

The bottom line? Instead of ranting against imposed policies, embrace them celebrate differences, treat people equally and release all the potential that really makes a difference to **your** bottom line!

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