

## 5 STEPS TOWARDS A SUCCESSFUL GENDER DIVERSITY PROGRAMME

New gender pay gap reporting has added some spice to diversity and inclusion programmes as some firms refuse to publish equity partner figures, for fear it will reveal an embarrassing position. And, despite significant effort and investment in D&I, the percentage of senior women at partner level remains stubbornly low; less than 30% which many are aiming for (in support of the 30% club goals).

Most professional service firms have publicly committed to diversity and inclusion and many set targets for female representation in the partner group. Most firms do well with gender diversity at trainee and associate levels, but the gender balance tends to go awry at senior associate level and above.

A key part of trying to change things is for firms to provide unconscious bias training to all partners. This is a step in the right direction, but of itself, not sufficient to change behaviours. There are two reasons for this:

- The first reason, obviously, is that our biases are largely unconscious. So, unless we do something else, all the training does is to make us aware that we have biases but does nothing to help us make these conscious so that we can start to challenge the way we think and hence our behaviour.
- The second, is that this type of training can trigger defensive behaviour and resistance amongst the primarily white, male, heterosexual audience. This is particularly the case if there is an assumption

that the bias is intentional. The defensiveness gets tapped out of cognitive dissonance created when well-intentioned people are asked to accept that they might be treating others unfairly.

As an ex-partner, I experienced both these things when I was first exposed to unconscious bias training. So, how do we tackle these challenges? From our work across the professions, we have found the following to be helpful.

1. Share some research. First, normalise biases as being part of how we are as humans. In ancient times, our ability to determine whether someone was a “friend or foe” kept us alive. This processing is found in our reptilian/mammalian brains and hence operates faster than our human brain and outside of our awareness. Secondly, explain how in-groups work to create a powerful set of social norms that act to exclude those outside the group. These norms are invisible to those inside the group, like the fish who can’t see the water they swim in.

2. Remind the group/establish the business case for having diverse teams. There is a wealth of data and research available now to make the case. It is even more powerful if data relevant to the sector and ideally, the Firm, can be shared.
3. Then establish how these dynamics are impacting those not in the in-group. This can be done in a variety of ways including focus groups, one to one meetings, reviewing staff survey results etc. By collating this and presenting it to the group it helps to raise awareness, which is often lacking. It also spurs well-intentioned individuals to want to act.
4. Next, meet each of the partner group one to one in a series of confidential meetings to seek their views on the situation and motivation to change. In our experience, partners are open about their views with us which gives a clear picture of the current situation and often the challenges that any change programme may face. As with most situations, there is a distribution of positions with respect to the topic. At the two ends of the spectrum there are small groups who are either fervent supports of the change or determined that nothing should change at all. However, the majority sit in the middle, open to the conversation before they decide which way to jump. We summarise the themes from the confidential meetings, supported by anonymised quotes, which we share with the partner group. "Holding a mirror" for the group in this way is often the thing that sparks the real conversation that is needed.
5. Hopefully, taken together, the above steps create a "coalition of the willing" who are prepared to commit to new ways of thinking and behaving. We support each individual to work towards their commitment through coaching. A key enabler is for the group to agree and to give permission to hold each other to account and call out inappropriate behaviour amongst the partner group. This is a key way of bringing the unconscious into the conscious and it has to come for the partners themselves as it

is difficult for anyone more junior or in Business Services to do this.

In this way, what we have seen is the combined impact of the small steps that each partner is taking having a noticeable and significant impact on the way unconscious bias plays out on the group.

Of course, this is not a quick fix, and meaningful and sustained change takes months, if not years to achieve. Hence, the other key ingredient is supportive leadership from the senior partners to continue to push the change when we have left the room. It is also important to share and celebrate small successes and the first steps towards change.

If you want to really drive your diversity and inclusion programme and change unconscious behaviours, please contact us for a no obligation meeting to discuss how we might help you and your team.



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