

Trading Places: What brands can do to promote equality and diversity

HELEN BROWN, GLOBAL CHIEF HR & TALENT OFFICER, MEDIACOM 24 JUL 2018

We talk a lot about promoting equality and diversity in the workplace, but what else needs to be done? In this article, Helen Brown, MediaCom's Global Chief HR & Talent Officer, argues that if we are to truly overcome inequality in all forms, we first need to look at the societal barriers to change and face our fears about what it means to be unbiased.

Gender and diversity are hot topics. There are numerous articles and panel discussions including women of minority ethnicities talking about the challenges they have faced and overcome with regards to equality and bias. Having spoken with some of those women, I know they are frustrated that they are still being asked to talk about being a *woman in*

business, rather than their experiences as a business leader who also happens to be a woman, of a particular ethnic background and/or a mum, single or otherwise.

It's a subtle yet important difference in perception that author Lauren Groff recently highlighted in a recent interview by [the Harvard Gazette](#), Groff was asked how she manages the balance of work and family. Her reply, in a word: Nope. "I understand that this is a question of vital importance to many people, particularly to other mothers who are artists trying to get their work done, and know that I feel for everyone in the struggle," Groff said. "But until I see a male writer asked this question, I'm going to respectfully decline to answer it."

Beyond the desire to simply 'do the right things', there are sound commercial reasons for equality and diversity in the workplace. In the McKinsey report 'Why Diversity Matters', they stated companies in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity were 33 percent more likely to have financial returns above their competitors, and those in the top quartile for gender diversity were 21 percent more likely to have increased financial returns.

Brands are aware of this because unsurprisingly they've also read the McKinsey report. Anyone who works on pitch submissions knows how often the question arises: "What is your approach to talent management, equality and inclusion?"

Global brands want to be reassured they are engaging an agency whose employees are representative of the market they operate in, and the consumers they wish to communicate to. They also want to be guaranteed a richness in thinking brought about by teams with differing backgrounds and experiences.

But if we are to overcome inequality in all forms, we need to look at the societal barriers to change, and that, in my humble opinion, involves facing our fears around what it means to be truly unbiased.

What causes bias? Humans are pack animals; we are naturally attracted to people who appear to be similar to us, whether because of geography, language, race, gender, politics, hobbies and a plethora of other factors. Whether we admit it or not, this impacts who we

choose to spend time with personally, and in business.

In the 1987 film classic *Wall Street*, the protagonist, Gordon Gekko says of business “If you need a friend, get a dog.” Harsh and maybe true on Wall Street in the 80’s but any kid who played team sports at school learnt early on the value of having a diverse mix of people with different skills around them. Sports psychology shows us that we are stronger as a group than as individuals. The esprit de corps that’s developed in the pack, gives us the strength to tackle and achieve more than we thought possible alone. In business, having a network of people who we can turn to for advice makes a big difference to personal and professional success later in life. Who needs a dog?

However when you’re in the minority, it is more challenging to build a network and the thought of losing that and starting over isn’t always appealing. So how does this impact inequality in business? Because unless we are aware of the dangers of the pack mentality, natural bias can determine our decisions. And not being part of the pack can inhibit our opportunity to succeed.

According to Catalyst.org, men are less likely than women to get promoted based on performance. Is this because they aren’t as capable? Or because they have wider networks and are being sponsored and promoted by someone like them? It is certainly far more challenging to persuade women to move from their current role or agency. Is this because there are more men hiring at senior levels or because women believe it will be a challenge to build an influential *internal network*, and feel moving and losing that would be a detriment to their career?

GroupM’s Walk the Talk program looks to encourage women to define ‘allies’ across WPP to support and sponsor their personal and professional growth. We are changing the language used in job descriptions and have introduced 50/50 male/female interview and promotion panels to ensure equal gender representation.

All good and it’s helping to encourage more women to go forward for promotion but in addition to building *internal networks*, there is still another barrier to overcome; persuading

women to come back into the business from maternity, and if they do, into the most senior positions that may require a greater commitment of time and travel. Speaking with both men and women, it appears there are still barriers and mis-conceptions before we can start trading places. If senior leadership is preoccupied with presenteeism, it can inform their decisions regarding hiring or promoting employees who work more flexible working patterns where they are available. So whilst formalising flexible working patterns is a solution, it can also highlight the fact more women currently request it than men, creating unnecessary divisions.

In the UK shared parental leave and flexible working patterns have been offered to employees for a number of years and yet only a tiny percentage of men take up these benefits which means, even though they still go and pick up the kids, they don't advertise it, it's not *official* and so the perception is that they work full time and are available whenever required, for whatever role. Therefore, as well as encouraging women to manage their time in a less formalised, agile way, do we also have to persuade more men to *officially* take up shared parental leave and flexible working patterns just to normalise it? Which if true, in itself is an absurd situation. Either way, we need to understand what stops people from taking advantage of these benefits and roles currently. Is it peer pressure, income or choice?

We are developing a program to look at role identity, language and stereotyping both in and out of the workplace, with the hope that it will improve how we understand each other in every aspect of our lives.

Maybe this is just a challenge for Generation X or Millennials and our future talent will have no such societal hang-ups. Currently it looks positive. At the level of these employees there are as many, if not more women in the business, there is no gender pay gap, their teams are diverse, they work the same amount of hours, go for the same promotion opportunities and they see the role of parent and career the responsibility of both sexes. They are equal.

Fast forward to 2023 and equality is no longer a hot topic. The industry can't quite imagine why there would ever be a need to discuss it. We can once again focus on industry issues, applaud creativity, and celebrate those people behind it on an equal footing. Regardless of

gender, race or background.

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OPINION