

A VIEW FROM SUE UNERMAN

How to ensure all personality types are welcome at the corporate ball

DIVERSITY OPINION

SUE UNERMAN, CHIEF TRANSFORMATION OFFICER 06 DEC 2017

The panto season is here.

Oh no it isn't.

Oh yes it is.

It's maybe not generally known that the original folk tales on which one of the greatest panto hits is loosely based were really quite dark.

The [Grimm Brothers](#)' telling of Cinderella differs from the panto and Disney version in several respects. For instance Cinderella's ball gown is not the gift of a fairy godmother but of a tree growing on her mother's grave that she has watered with her tears. The stepsisters end up getting their eyes pecked out. And the glass slipper episode has a

darker turn too.

You'll remember from childhood the story runs that the **only** way that the clearly rather unobservant Prince Charming can identify Cinderella after the ball is by searching the kingdom for a woman whose tiny foot fits the glass slipper left on the stairs of the palace. The so called "ugly sisters" can apparently fool the prince into thinking that they are the woman he intends to make his bride *apart* from the fact that they can't squeeze their foot into the slipper.

In the original version they do indeed get the slipper on. The evil stepmother ensures that they do by cutting off a toe or two. The prince only clocks that this is fake because of the blood, the blood that spills everywhere.

Uncomfortable stuff.

As uncomfortable as every day can be for people who work in an environment where they need to cut off aspects of their personalities in order to fit in.

The Glass Wall holds back women from the careers they deserve in the workplace.

There is another glass metaphor, the Glass Slipper problem, which afflicts everyone who doesn't fit the culture and expectations of their chosen career. There are many unspoken expectations wrapped up in the job you take, fuelled by years of cultural imagery. For example an investigative journalist is expected to be hungry, edgy, a bit tired looking and fearless. A chef is meant to be swearsy and aggressive.

If you're a comfortable well rested journalist, does that make you less good at chasing down a story?

If you're efficient and relaxed are you a worse chef?

If you don't participate in media's drinking culture are you less likely to progress?

A professor at the University of Colorado, Karen Lee Ashcraft, [wrote](#) a paper identifying this issue. Ashcraft writes that some occupations have come to be “naturally possessed” of features that fit certain people much more than others. If you have ambitions to progress within an organisation that is characterised with attributes that don’t come naturally to you, then you may feel under huge pressure to adopt them, even if it means hiding your real identity day in and day out.

This can put an enormous strain on people and the effort it takes is not only exhausting but of course therefore detracts from the energy that would otherwise be available for doing good work.

Sometimes the attributes are sexual orientation or skin colour. Sometimes it’s more subtle. Do you ski? If you do is it at the “right resort”? If not, in some companies, you might as well have not bothered.

Squeezing your foot into a Glass slipper that doesn’t fit is always painful. Organisations that go along with this are missing out on the benefits of diversity and wasting their teams’ energies on a fruitless exercised of conformity.

For a truly happy ending, let Cinderella **and** her sisters, **and** the dame **and** Buttons, Gus Gus **and** Jaq, not to mention Aladdin, Dick and his cat **all** go to the corporate ball.

DIVERSITY OPINION