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## Leadership Essentials

# Appreciating Diversity

A collaborative leader is inclusive and sensitive to the needs of others



There has long been a legal and ethical focus on equality, diversity and inclusion, but now organisations have recognised that having a diverse workforce is also important to their success.

What is Discrimination?

Abusing or threatening someone with violence, pushing and shoving them or causing actual physical harm	Sexually harassing someone, including verbal remarks or unwanted physical contact
Causing damage to someone’s property or possessions	Spreading malicious gossip

According to the Equality Act ( 2010 ) Discrimination means treating someone unfairly because they possess a particular ‘protected characteristic’:

Age	Disability
Sex	Marital or civil partnership status
Gender re-assignment	Sexual orientation
Race	Religion or Belief (or political belief in Northern Ireland)
Pregnancy and maternity	Gender

**Unfairly** means that any of these personal characteristics (rather than the individual’s ability to do their job or other objective criteria) has influenced a decision affecting them.

Discrimination by team members often takes the form of harassment.

**Harassment** means using unwanted or unwelcome words or actions that knowingly cause distress, such as:

- If someone asks for the person to stop doing or saying something but they continue.
- If someone does something they should know would be unwelcome, including making remarks in relation to protected characteristics, appearance or socio-economic status.

Your Role as a Leader

Some people who are being discriminated against or harassed may feel that they can’t say anything, especially if the person doing it is in a position of power – which can simply mean that they have been there longer, are part of a small group which dominates the team, or are simply bigger than the person being harassed.

It is your job to make sure that everyone understands that such behaviour is unacceptable and that:

- If they do it, they may be disciplined
- If they see it happening, they must report it and ensure that everyone is aware of the procedures to do so
- If they suffer it, they can report it and not be blamed or suffer any recriminations
- Team members are adequately trained to promote equality, diversity and inclusion

Unconscious Bias

‘Unconscious bias’ is the term used to describe having prejudices and unsubstantiated opinions which you have not thought through, or even thought about, for a long time, if ever. It means that your opinion on and reactions to whatever the biases are about will be automatic. But the terms ‘bias’ and ‘prejudice’ also mean that this unconscious belief is not very fair, is irrational, or simply inaccurate in some way.

This is dangerous. Self-aware leaders make efforts to uncover and counteract unconscious bias. They consistently try to start conversations with, and listen to, a diverse range of individuals. This gives them an insight into possibilities and realities of which they had not been aware of before. They ask for feedback about themselves from others (and never shoot the messenger!) They regularly question their own values, and their conclusions and beliefs about people, issues and priorities.

Social Sensitivity

Social sensitivity goes beyond discrimination. A study of teams in Google in 2016 revealed that the most effective teams were the ones where the team members felt safe to be themselves. This psychological safety is “a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up,” where there is “interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves.” (Edmonson,1999 ) A team where members are nice and kind to each other will be a more effective team and a better place to work, and the team leader, should role model that behaviour with their colleagues.

Another area in which you can guide your team is to ensure that they put the person before the label, known as ‘People First Language’ where that is appropriate. An example of this is referring to an employee who is on maternity leave, rather than a maternity leave employee. A further example would be to avoid saying “wheelchair bound” but rather a “person who uses a wheelchair”. However, it should also be borne in mind that in other situations ‘Identity First Language’ is sometimes more appropriate. For example, many people who have been diagnosed with a Autism Spectrum Condition prefer “Autistic Person” rather than “Person with Autism”. In such cases, as with pronouns relating to gender (he/she/they), it should be considered best practice to seek the preference of the person rather than making assumptions, to promote inclusivity.

The Benefits of Diversity and Inclusion

**Diversity** means having people within your team who broadly reflect the population. **Inclusion** means taking active steps to attract, develop and promote people from diverse backgrounds.

Groups of people who are all the same, tend to think and act alike. The differences between diverse members result in the generation of more creative ideas, encouraging innovation in what you do and how it’s done – an essential characteristic of ongoing improvement.

Diverse groups of people bring different perspectives, sets of experiences and attitudes to their role. Diverse teams benefit from these differences in the following ways:

The different members of the team can reflect differences amongst your customers and stakeholders, making it easier to understand their requirements

The different backgrounds can often mean a more diverse skill set

Team members can learn from each other, broadening their knowledge and skills and creating a sense of mutual respect and understanding

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