

Under the skin

Since when did we need a business case for treating people fairly, asks diversity expert **Binna Kandola**, who explains the thinking behind his controversial new book

Much like the mermaid and the unicorn, the business case for diversity is a mythical creature. The search for this BCD is an exercise in futility. Many of the arguments that have been put up may be well meaning but are not necessarily well thought through, often lacking data and sometimes even logic.

Let's take one: "the need for our workforce to reflect our customers". I can understand why this would be an objective for organisations, but what if our customers are mostly white and male? Furthermore, the aim may be laudable, but what if we decided to call it "race matching"? It doesn't sound quite so innocuous now, does it?

As with anything that is adopted by organisations, orthodoxies quickly develop – and diversity is no different. The leading organisations are all doing similar things: developing strategies, organising training, having senior-level champions, creating networking groups, monitoring data and evaluating processes. There can be no doubt that this management approach has led to change but, crucially, not as much as most people expected or wanted. While all of the above are necessary, they cannot be considered to be sufficient.

Diversity has stalled. To get it moving again, I believe we need clarity about why it is important and honesty about what is blocking its progress.

While speaking at a diversity conference recently, I was asked by a delegate: "Apart from the moral argument, what exactly is the business case for diversity?" For me, this question characterises the muddled and confused thinking that is part of the reason that diversity and inclusion have reached an impasse. Is it ever possible to put the moral case to one side? And when did we stop being a moral nation?

Actually, when moral boundaries are crossed, people are not afraid to let their views be known, and we have seen several notable examples recently, including executive bonuses (yes, we're looking at you, Sir Fred) and MPs' expenses. In any case, when did we need a business case for: treating people with dignity and respect, listening, empowering and ensuring people are treated fairly?

There is an argument for diversity and it is actually simple and enduring – it's about talent. It is about ensuring that talent is attracted, recruited, developed, retained and promoted. It is about ensuring that we make

decisions based on merit to ensure that the best people are appointed and promoted. To do this, however, we need to reappraise what is meant by "talent" and "best". Whether we like it or not, we have preconceptions about these concepts that lead us to discriminate unfairly, and discrimination not only blights individuals' lives, it limits organisational effectiveness.

It is on this subject that we need much greater honesty. The reason we haven't made the progress expected on diversity is because of people – or, in other words, us. Psychological research quite clearly demonstrates that all human beings are biased. We all carry around stereotypes of groups of people; we make assumptions and these affect our behaviour and the decisions we make, even though we may believe we are acting entirely rationally and without prejudice. Some biases that we have include, for example, an egocentric bias, meaning a bias towards ourselves. Ask a couple to tell you the percentage of household chores that they each carry out and see if it comes to exactly 100 per cent.

We also prefer people who are like us and, according to social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner, this is a three-step process: categorising – we simplify the world around us by creating categories to which we can assign people; identifying with the groups to which we belong; and, third, comparing members of our group with those of other groups. Put simply, we tend to prefer people who are similar to us.

This research is backed up by increased knowledge of how our brains operate, revealing that there are biases we may not even be aware of. Unconscious or implicit biases are based on the association between one object and another (for example, old age and grey hair; football fans and hooligans) and we all hold them in one form or another.

Our unconscious biases can, and often do, reveal some surprising results. For example, the Institute of Work Psychology at Sheffield University asked a group of highly qualified professionals to take the implicit association test (IAT) – a reaction-time test that measures our unconscious associations. Prior to taking the IAT, the participants filled in a questionnaire on racial prejudice and the

results showed them to have little or none. The results of the IAT, however, revealed that the participants had an unconscious bias that associated white faces with hiring and black faces with firing. At a conscious level, therefore, they believed themselves to be fair, but

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their unconscious attitudes demonstrated something else altogether.

Our image of the biased person is likely to be that of the bigot, intolerant of difference, who demonstrates an unwillingness to change. The truth, though, is that we all have biases and, unless we are able to discuss this, we will continually be thwarted in our desire to achieve diversity and inclusion in our workplaces. Despite the fact that we are all biased, it is a subject that is very difficult to raise in an open, blame-free way in organisations today. We are so conscious of the need to appear fair that we hide our prejudices, sometimes even from ourselves.

The good news is that we are capable of changing our attitudes and our biases. Some of the changes that we can make are not that difficult to carry out. Recent research shows that even the simple process of instructing ourselves to be fair can produce remarkable reductions in levels of unconscious bias.

This requires us to be brave enough to confront this most difficult and awkward of topics. We need to accept that we are all biased, understand our individual biases, and be continually mindful of them whenever we are dealing with people who are different from us.

This isn't something that can be fixed overnight, or even over a period of years. It requires constant vigilance. It can never be a case of an organisation or even an individual being able to say that they have no biases. We need to be reminding ourselves of our own fallibility all the time - changing our mental default position from "I am fair" to "I am biased and I need to work hard to ensure I am fair".

Greater clarity will enable us to focus on why diversity really is important. Greater honesty will enable us to confront the biggest obstacle of all: ourselves and the prejudices we all have. 

LINKS

Further reading

Professor Binna Kandola OBE is a business psychologist and expert on diversity. His latest book, *The value of difference: eliminating bias in organisations*, is available from www.pearnkandola.com.

Read PM's review at www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/kandola59

FROM THE CIPD

Toolkit

Pearn Kandola's toolkit *Managing Diversity*, gives guidance notes and templates for implementing an organisational diversity policy. A free sample can be found at the CIPD's website.

www.cipd.co.uk/toolkits