

First the bad news: the diversity movement, in my opinion, has stalled. The last decade and a half has seen a lot of time, energy and resources put into diversity and inclusion at governmental, societal and organisational levels. Governments have brought in more and more anti-discrimination legislation. There is a great deal of concern amongst communities about the issues of social exclusion. Organisations have policies, strategies, champions, networks, training, targets, etc – all of which demonstrate their commitment to doing something.

But the feeling persists that, for all this effort, we do not have enough to show for it. The actions are necessary, but clearly not sufficient. The problem, however, is not in the frameworks and structures, because we have a pretty good idea now about the management infrastructure that needs to be in place. The problem is us – you, me and everyone else. We are the problem because, as human beings the research tells us we are designed to be biased, to discriminate, to like some people and dislike others on an automatic basis.

Allied to this, though, is the reluctance to discuss the topics of prejudice and bias without rancour, emotion and blaming. Whilst it may be convenient to scapegoat people for their attitudes (Jade Goody and Carol Thatcher come to mind), we should not believe that each of us is not capable of behaving like them, given the right circumstances.

We need to be able to discuss these topics openly and to realise that even the most noble amongst us is biased. Accepting this

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basic premise is important because, in doing so, we can question the complacent assumptions that we live by, eg “I always select the best person for the job”. All of us may want to believe this but we should be testing ourselves to see if this is true. What do we mean by best? How do we really make the decisions? How can we be sure that we do this always?

Now the good news: despite the economic difficulties, diversity has not been pushed down organisations’ lists of priorities.

In the late 1980s, in the euphoric run-up to the last recession, there were labour shortages. Equality and diversity were seen as being critical if organisations were to survive. In fact, the Equal Opportunities Commission built its strategy around the need for organisations to make the most of women in the labour market. Then the recession came, there were no longer labour shortages and the equality initiatives fell away almost as quickly as they had arrived.

Today, though, it feels different. Organisations are still putting effort into diversity – this is a positive sign that shows diversity and inclusion may have come of age in terms of acceptance. They may, at last, have become part of the mainstream discourse in our organisations.

We now need to capitalise on this and create strategies that help us all understand the part we play in making diversity and inclusion reality. This will mean not only examining why we discriminate but also appreciating that it can often be the small gestures or, indeed, the lack of a small gesture that can make others feel like they do not belong to a team or organisation.

Diversity has remained a priority even in these difficult times. To make the most of this, though, requires a change of direction, which is why diversity and inclusion are such exciting areas to be working in at the moment. ■

