

## Lunch Discussion

### The Case for Change: Racial Diversity and Inclusion in Business

Mandeep Heer, Independent People & Culture Transformation Consultant

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#### Introduction

Philippa Foster Back, Director of the IBE, opened the event by welcoming guests and introducing the speaker.

Mandeep Heer is an Independent People & Culture Transformation Consultant with 20 years of Human Resources experience working within the Telecommunications, Energy and Retail sectors since the achieving her MSc in HR Management. She held many roles over an 11 year period at O2 progressing to the top 35 senior UK leaders within the first few years. O2 have a refreshing way of looking at the topic of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) and Mandeep has picked up this topic with passion.

#### Main Item: Racial Diversity and Inclusion in Business

Mandeep thanked Philippa for the introduction and said she was pleased to be here to talk about this difficult subject. She left O2 around 6 weeks ago, and her time there represents one of the cultural changes she has led in the business.

As it is necessary to evoke emotion through this subject, Mandeep showed the audience a video called “The Race for Life: white privilege”. The video demonstrated the head start white people generally have in life compared to people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. It is important to remember that there are sub-sections of society that do not have the privilege that we in this room do. Not everyone has had the access to opportunities that we have had. She said that she has often found herself being the only person of colour in the room and asked herself why. We all experience a feeling of ‘otherness’ at times in our life. We should keep in mind how this makes us feel and consider how it would feel if this happened every day.

Statistics show that organisations with a clear purpose outperform their competitors. There is therefore a need to change the mindset of the operation as many organisations rely on a ‘launch and leave’ approach to D&I. Organisations should instead be investing time in learning and hire leaders with the ability to coach. The focus on D&I has largely in most industries concentrated on gender and achieving a 50/50 board, but inclusivity goes beyond this and focusing on diversity and inclusion issues should be integral to the business strategy and relationships with competitors, partners, suppliers and people more widely.

At O2, BAME employees were asked about their experiences at work and these anonymised stories about their experiences both in work and outside of work helped to build the case for change. Research and statistics on the experiences of BAME in the UK and workplace are also critical to the case for change as they help to hold up a mirror to an organisation in an undeniable way. The problem with presenting the case for change using language such as “-isms” like racism and words such as discrimination is that they can often trigger ‘System 1’ thinking and nodding heads syndrome. While everyone agrees that something needs to be done about these “-isms”, it is difficult to drive action beyond leaving this issue which can often be seen as HR’s issue to solve. By showing videos such as Race of Life and hearing personal stories about this subject, ‘System 2’ thinking can be triggered and it is only then that our emotions are evoked.

But what are the effects of business not considering BAME diversity? If marketing and advertising teams are not diverse enough, you get examples of advertising featuring blackface and black profiling – some such examples were shared with the group. In the world of AI, you end up with voice recognition systems that do not recognise women’s voices and face recognition software that does not recognise darker skin. By not considering BAME diversity, you risk not reflecting your customers and society more generally.

O2’s BAME ambitions covered a wide range of goals. They want there to be BAME representation at all levels. You cannot assume that HR functions are free of bias, after all they tend to be majority white female so BAME efforts should start within these teams and teams such as marketing and product development. It is also important for organisations to keep in mind the need to create a process around talent development. At O2, the aspiration was to be representative of the 15% BAME UK workforce. This desire to make a difference should go beyond your organisation to include CSR programmes aimed at schools and colleges in order to make BAME students

feel like they can be successful in industries currently lacking in BAME representation. Part of this goal is educating staff on this matter and making them “race fluent”. Being unsure of which words to use is one of the main reasons why people shy away from discussing Race D&I.

At O2, there are also other initiatives seeking to increase BAME representation. They have a BAME Open Forum facilitating conversations about issues facing BAME employees. On the question of what you should call your network, Mandeep explained that the way she looks at it is that BAME people are all part of individual minority groups that have collective goals. As such, in her experience of driving cultural change by working together, they are more likely to achieve those goals. The network at O2 exists on a digital platform which is Open for all employees to share relevant materials, celebrate BAME moments and have conversations about this topic. A BAME Culture Club has also been set up which encourages dialogue and discussion around relevant films on a monthly basis to normalise the topic.

One of the most powerful initiatives has been O2’s BAME Reverse Mentoring Circles, where BAME employees have volunteered to mentor the executives. Through sharing their personal stories, these executive Board members have become more aware and more understanding of the obstacles and discrimination felt by BAME individuals. Focusing on such initiatives has to go beyond signing off on KPIs. O2 have set targets for BAME candidate shortlists these are set higher than the 15% UK workforce demographic to retrospectively close the representation gap at senior levels,

Driving profound cultural change at any organisation requires a series of key steps. At O2, gaining valuable employee insights has helped normalise the conversation around BAME employees and the challenges they face. Senior leadership activists and outside the organisation using their voices to spread the message has also helped drive the agenda. In order to implement viral changes, a lot of focus has to be put in to the cause. She believes what gets measured gets delivered so organisations should put in place targets and measures for success. By formulating KPIs on this topic, goals relating to BAME employees are more likely to be sufficiently focused on at the Board level and throughout the organisation.

It is important to make these processes feel “human” so that all employees, including BAME employees, can take pride in their heritage and have the opportunity to be themselves. Recruitment and HR departments Research by HBR found that organisations now focusing on diversity of skills, experience and thought have done so at the detriment of demographic diversity in their businesses - therefore we need to be mindful that we don’t skip over the need to focus on race diversity – we still need to ask ‘who are we including’.

## Q&A

The presentation was followed by questions from the audience. Among the issues raised were:

- When it comes to this topic, it is easy to pick out bad examples from different industries. Do you have any examples of organisations that are doing well in this space?
- How can you drive this agenda in a global business?
- Do you advocate ‘pulse’ surveys to further this agenda?
- What has been your biggest challenge in pushing this agenda in your organisation?
- How can you go beyond nodding heads to implement changes?
- For your BAME Culture Club, which films did you show and why?
- How can we tackle the lack of diversity in the property sector?
- How far on the journey have you come and have you faced any backlash?

## Close

Philippa Foster Back closed the event by saying that this presentation has demonstrated that we all tend to live in siloes. She said she would take on board Mandeep’s advice to talk to someone you would not normally talk to the next time she is in a room full of unfamiliar faces.

The IBE will launch its Speak Up Toolkit on 1 July, and this will be followed by a Summer of Speak Up with webinars and events on this topic.