

Laura Liswood: Advancing Diversity

You only have to look at photos of senior management teams to know that diversity initiatives have not achieved all their goals. Laura Liswood is an advisor to Goldman Sachs and author of *The Loudest Duck: Moving Beyond Diversity while Embracing Differences to Achieve Success at Work*. Laura explains what we need to do now to maintain the progress towards greater diversity in the workplace.

DC: People have been working on diversity for quite some time, why are we not there yet?

LL: It's not a matter of something having gone wrong, but the journey is turning out to be longer than we thought. The things organizations have done, like diversity training and women's networks are building blocks to get to the diversity we aspire to. Many people thought that these things would be enough, but these are just foundations and there are some additional things to work on.

What we are now looking at is more difficult than the first steps towards diversity. We need to work on people's way of looking at the world and ways of thinking that are deeply embedded. We need to help people become much more aware of the preferences, perspectives and archetypes they bring into the workplace.

DC: Most managers in North America are already reasonably enlightened, what perspectives do they need to work on?

LL: You are right to point out that most people don't consciously discriminate. This is a big change; less than thirty years ago you'd have "help wanted-male" or "help wanted-female" signs. That is gone.

The issue that remains is the underlying belief structures we grow up with. There are still prevalent cultural stories like "Cinderella" and common myths like "The Hero's Journey"; these are powerful archetypes that subtly affect our perceptions. For example, the traits we associate with leadership tend to be male traits, that is the kind of thing we need to tackle.

There are many little things that hinder diversity. A woman is less likely to be in the situation where a senior person thinks "You remind of me or me when I was younger" and hence don't get quite the same mentoring as men. In a meeting, men are less likely to 'hear' a woman's suggestion, so you have the phenomenon of a man repeating an idea a woman voiced earlier and getting the credit for it. This is not intentional discrimination, it is just a result of how women generally speak and how men generally listen. Also men may be uncomfortable giving

women negative feedback which they need or feel it's more of a risk putting a woman in a critical role than someone from the dominant group.

All these things are swirling around and they are subtle but they add up. These small disadvantages have a big impact over the arc of a woman's career.

DC: You used the phrase “the dominant group”. What do you mean by that?

LL: I like to use the distinction between dominant and non-dominant groups, because it gives better insight than talking just about men and women. In any society you have dominant and non-dominant groups. What happens to women in organizations also happens to other historically out of power groups.

DC: In the US and Canada we tend to believe there is no dominant group, we are all equal.

LL: If you see a picture of the senior management, you get a pretty good idea of what the dominant group looks like in an organization. We want to think we don't have classes, but we absolutely do.

In North America, people don't think of themselves as being in the dominant group. In their mind the way the world works for them is presumed to be the way it works for everyone. They don't recognize that the experience for others may be quite different. For example, if you do a poll about the justice system in the US, most white people are pretty positive, whereas African Americans are substantially less positive—this is because the two groups have had very different experiences in how the system works.

Dominant groups will say their organization is definitely a meritocracy; no one likes to think they got to the top because they've been subtly advantaged. It is very difficult for people in the dominant group to walk in the shoes of others who are not experiencing the world the same way. Interestingly, it does work the other way, the non-dominant group understands the dominant group very well. It's like the elephant and the mouse; the elephant is scarcely aware of the mouse, whereas the mouse pays very close attention to the elephant.

Both groups have their advantages. People in the dominant group are confident, they have a vision, they don't care what others think. The non-dominant group has more emotional intelligence because they have to. Good leaders show traits from both groups.

DC: Given this understanding of subtle advantages and disadvantages, what should organizations do to promote diversity?

LL: You need to put more emphasis on creating awareness of the dynamics we have been talking about. Managers need to be made more responsible for levelling the playing field (and generally speaking it is not level).

You can give managers very specific examples of how these dynamics work and that can be helpful in opening their eyes. So you might tell a manager that an American man is more likely to tell you what he has been working on, (“tooting your own horn”); whereas a Japanese male who works for you is unlikely to do that. You have to be aware of this, f when it comes time to giving a promotion, you’ll be aware of all the things the American male has been telling you, but you won’t know much about the Japanese male. That can put the Japanese male at a disadvantage.

If a manager invites his team out to golf, he or she needs to know they are giving extra access to those people who are golf players. The manager isn’t trying to unfairly tilt the playing field, but they are doing so. This doesn’t mean you can’t play golf; just that you have to understand the dynamics and compensate for them.

While what we are talking about is psychological, you can break it down into some specific things people can watch out for.

DC: How do managers react to this approach?

LL: Managers do react quite well to this, and when I talk to the dominant group, I don’t use words like bias or stereotype because these are people of good faith and they want to see some changes. It is surprising, but often I hear from people who look like they are in the dominant group who say they can relate to the experiences of the non-dominant group; that some sort of subtle exclusion has happened to them too.

So my message is quite positive, managers can learn to detect the kind of things that advantage or disadvantage certain groups, and are quite willing to work on adapting their behaviour to compensate for that.

Laura Liswood’s book [*The Loudest Duck*](#) is available at Amazon.com. Feel free to pass this newsletter on to people you know who are responsible for diversity.

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