



Part 1: Celebrating Diversity – how to do more... Webinar write up

Wednesday October 14th, 1-2pm

By Hassan Chaudhury

- Moderator, Hassan Chaudhury – Healthcare UK, Department for International Trade and TECH4CV19
- Shaheed Peera – Creative Floor
- Avril Lee – Chair CIPR Diversity & Inclusion Network and Red Consultancy
- Nikki Kahlton – West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust and The Shuri Network

Our moderator, Hassan Chaudhury, opened the event noting that society is currently going through a moment. Diversity and inclusion are big topics of conversation so he hoped we would have both a positive and an honest conversation.

Avril began by broadening the topic to touch both diversity and inclusion speaking of inclusive workplaces to enable people to achieve their full potential and not be judged on factors such as race and gender. Furthermore, diversity should be viewed as a positive, for example as a way to engage fresh talent, rather than as a problem. However, having been involved in the topic for over 10 years, people now want to see change and are asking what can we do, especially as Covid has shown we can be flexible in how organisations deal with their people.

Shaheed spoke of two camps which need to be addressed. The first would typically say “of course diversity is important” but have no real idea on how to implement it. The second camp would argue that surely it’s about the best person and it doesn’t matter about colour, gender, sexuality etc. He felt we need safe spaces to ask questions and pose controversial perspectives in order to have the debate. Citing statistics from The Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) Agency Census 2019ⁱ, Shaheed pointed out that 92% of roles in the UK communications industry are held by those considered to be ‘advantaged’ i.e. white, male, middle class and university educated. While there is clearly nothing wrong with any of those elements, it doesn’t reflect the people and the society we speak to. It’s not just the UK. 120m Americans do not see themselves portrayed in adverts so there is clearly an issue.

Shaheed also spoke about his personal experience of almost always being the only person of a completely different background and culture in the room but that has been an advantage for him because firms who do not have a mixture of people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives lack coverage. For Shaheed, diversity is not a ‘woke project’. It is not about jumping on the bandwagon. It has always been really poor in the communications industry and if you don’t reflect those you serve and communicate to and cover your blind spots then you’re not going to get to the best work. We don’t need to debate why diversity is important and what it is. It is how do you make your product better.

On inclusivity, Avril added it was about getting diverse people into our businesses but importantly about retention and ensuring all people have the same access to opportunities and progression. Can they excel, be rewarded and have influence over time? That is an inclusive business. At the moment, too often you are rewarded if you look and sound like the existing leadership. Leaders should take personal responsibility for changing this.

Shaheed agreed that inclusion is the action and asked agencies to consider where they go looking for talent. Avril was firm that diverse talent is out there and always has been but often overlooked until now. Even then, we should consider mentoring talent from within organisations and open our eyes to transferable skills and people from other industries, look to different recruiters and be proactive about inviting people into the industry rather than waiting passively.

Hassan then invited Nikki to present briefly on The Shuri Network [www.shurinetwork.com] which is the first NHS and care network of women of colour in digital health. It celebrates difference and diversity, challenging the system to take action and supporting women of colour to succeed. It is supported by Health Education England (HEE), NHSx, NHS England, techUK, IBM and more, with over 700 members including allies. It came about because women of colour were being overlooked far too often for roles in digital health and often finding themselves isolated and alone.

Hassan asked Avril and Shaheed if healthcare comms needed a similar initiative. Avril said she would welcome collaborative efforts to maintain momentum, ensure diversity does not simply become topic of the month and to bring people with us, after all it is not the job of the BAME person in the group to sort this out.

Shaheed suggested we look to reverse mentorship where staff can mentor someone who has never experienced racial discrimination and inequality. Nikki recounted her positive experience as a reverse mentor which she felt needs to be practiced more widely and how networks, like The Shuri Network, generate ripple effects.

Avril walked everyone through the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) 2020 report on Race in PR: BAME lived experiences in the UK PR industryⁱⁱ. Avril is Chair of CIPR's Diversity and Inclusion Network. They conducted market research, assessed the data and then conducted 17 in-depth qualitative interviews from a wide range of UK-based BAME PR practitioners. While the findings may surprise those of a non-BAME background, Avril explained many people of a minority background would recognise what they found. Published just three weeks after the murder of George Floyd, the timeliness of the report and the human nature of its approach meant it got serious attention across the PR sector. The report found common themes and experiences; racism and microaggression in the workplace, non-inclusive/monoculture, unconscious bias, unequal opportunities and progression such as missing out on the big projects and clients and a feeling that they had to work harder than their white counterparts and how exhausting it was psychologically to try to constantly fit in to get on. This often led to minority talent going independent or going freelance to test out organisations and how inclusive their cultures were before committing. The report has led to discussion and debate in PR circles as a result. Nikki explained how she saw similar things in the NHS, as co-Chair of a BME Network in the health service, with job-hopping a common occurrence. This has led to cultural intelligence workshops, subtly different to unconscious bias training to try to help people become more culturally aware and adjust to be more inclusive.

Shaheed highlighted the award-winning Ikea ThisAbles campaignⁱⁱⁱ as an outstanding example but stressed that it is not just major firms like IKEA who can embrace diversity in their comms. He shared a story of a brilliantly executed campaign for an everyday brief. He explained that he was aiming to

inspire those working in a communications agency today who appreciate they need a little more diversity, demonstrating how it is possible to think a little bit differently and end up with a far better product. He concluded that if you don't have that diversity around the table, go out and get it, go out and find it. Understand the communities you are communicating with. Go and talk to them. Understand how they live. Getting those diverse perspectives will make your ideas better and stronger.

The last portion of the webinar focused on practical tips. Avril explained how the CIPR report wrestled with this and decided one-size does not fit all for organisations. Avril had already listed recruitment, retention, talent pools and different recruiters. She then focused on the topics of progression and reward. How do we judge performance? How do we decide what leadership looks like? Organisations should also examine their transparency; how they measure and monitor. Avril gave the example of The Blueprint diversity mark, setup by Elizabeth Bananuka, which helps organisations attract, retain and nurture diverse talent^{iv} and suggested it be used as a practical starting point for organisations.

She went further advising firms to look at who they set up as role models and to celebrate the talent they have. It is crucial to be able to call out unacceptable behaviour and language without being penalised for it. It is unacceptable that those who speak out on issues of diversity are deemed to be troublemakers or even may be given diversity as a special project. Avril felt strongly that it all hinges on senior leadership. Worthy initiatives can be put in place but without senior leadership talking the talk and walking the walk we simply won't see long-term sustainable change. Avril also highlighted how the UK is something like 8% BAME on average but in urban areas and big cities where many of our large firms are based it can be closer to 30-40% so there is no way any of our organisations are representative enough particularly at senior leadership level.

Shaheed explained that people of colour or people who are different want to see role models and people like themselves on the board or making core decisions so they can believe they can make it to the top. He then broke the topic into 3; leadership, education and pipeline. For those larger firms with diverse people in their organisations but not on their boards, Shaheed advised putting these people on the board today adding it doesn't matter what the title is. If a firm is convinced that diversity makes business better and covers blind spots then cover them with what you have.

Audience questions included how senior leadership can help people to be their authentic selves, pay gap reporting, supporting minority role models and how organisations can be less risk-averse. Avril felt organisations have probably never been as risk-averse but this carries reputational risks today and now is the time for change for so many reasons. Nikki's view was that diversity leads to innovation and that the inequalities exposed by Covid needed diverse teams to handle them.

Shaheed said that success in this area would mean we wouldn't need to have these conversations but that there was still a long way to go. On leadership, he urged agencies to roll out anti-racist statements on their websites and contracts and related the example of Wieden+Kennedy who put up a bold message in the week after the murder of George Floyd^v, adding it is a shame many other agencies didn't follow. The Creative Floor has a talent and diversity fund (with sponsorship opportunities available) as well as a diversity pledge. This can help organisations set relevant metrics and goals. On education, organisations should all set up safe spaces where people can questions, even silly ones, as long as the intent is to learn. Another helpful tip is to ask colleagues from different backgrounds to share their life stories as a way to educate an organisation and realise the power of that perspective. On pipeline, Shaheed urged agencies to approach different universities and different recruiters for talent and offered direct help. Avril advised us to support role models by

asking them how they want to be helped and advised people to be allies by giving up a seat or sharing the big project with a BAME colleague and not to let the unacceptable pass us by without comment.

The event concluded with a call to join the PM Society in one of its interest groups and work together with us to make our industry better and a reminder that the Webinar Part 2 on how to be an ally will take place next month.

ⁱ <https://ipa.co.uk/news/agency-census-2019>

ⁱⁱ https://cipr.co.uk/CIPR/Our_work/Policy/Diversity_resources.aspx

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://thisables.com/en/about/>

^{iv} <https://thisistheblueprint.co.uk/the-blueprint-mark/>

^v <https://www.wk.com/culture/black-lives-matter>