



**Part 2: Celebrating Diversity – how can we be allies... Webinar write up
Wednesday 11th November 1-2pm**

By Elly Foster

First comes awareness, next comes allyship: reflections on celebrating diversity with the PM Society

I recently wrote about attending part one of the PM Society Diversity Interest Group webinar on celebrating diversity. You can find my reflections [here](#).

The anecdotal examples on the benefits of diversity (for those who need to hear them) shared during part one were excellent. For anyone who is hungry for actionable suggestions on how to play a bigger role, either as someone from a diverse or non-diverse background, the session delivered. Case in point, the next time I have a conversation with a client about the participant make up of an ad board or recruitment for market research, I have healthcare specific examples to share that illustrate exactly what we'll be missing if we don't take time to seek diverse perspectives.

Part two was more reflective, and perhaps more personal because of it. The panel was made up of Samin Saeed, Chief Scientific Officer at Novartis UK, Prof. Noor Shaker, Founder and CEO of Glamorous.AI and Sean Penistone, Senior Associate Consultant at Baringa Partners, with Hassan Chaudhury chairing once again.

Allyship can be push and pull

The panel began by picking apart what is meant by allyship. Regardless of our background, we may have more privilege than the person sitting next to us, as Samin noted. Whether it's class, race, education, financial circumstances or other, we can do well to reflect on our aspects of relative privilege and be aware of them. Letting our interactions with others be guided by thinking of the view from their shoes will never go out of fashion. Personally speaking, I understand that my own perspective is diverse because I live with a life-limiting condition, but I'm also a white middle class woman. As with advocacy work for many health conditions, I have become painfully aware of the over representation of views like mine in the cystic fibrosis community, which brings with it a real risk of other voices not being heard.

So, what is allyship? Well, sometimes it's being pushed or encouraged to do something and sometimes it's getting out of the way and letting another person move into the spotlight by removing oneself, and therefore creating a space to be filled. The first conundrum this raises, is knowing how to spot when we might be in a push, or pull, moment.

Samin shared an example of the former when she was encouraged by a trusted senior counterpart, who happens to be a white male, to pursue an opportunity. As she notes, “it’s not always easy to lean in, we all come with our own psychological barriers and sometimes need a bit of a shove!”

A question was put to Noor on whether, presented with examples of highly successful diverse business people like herself, there may be those who will say ‘the work is done’ and there’s no need to worry about being an ally of diversity anymore. This was a provocation of course, but Samin pointed out that seeing examples of success from diverse communities was more important than ever. It has been less than a week since Kamala Harris became Vice President-elect, but the intensity of conversation around the world has been proof of how impactful it has been to finally reach the milestone of a female, Black Asian becoming the second most powerful person in the United States. Perhaps we become so inured to the status quo, we don’t realise how personally affected we can be when progress finally comes. To that end, when one woman of colour finds professional success it makes it increasingly likely that she will serve as a beacon that others can follow.

Lessons from the international boardroom

Sean shared a great example of the nuances we must heed when working in multicultural situations. In a previous role at Astellas he was charged with helping the newly merged Japanese company take on a more international outlook. His team turned to the [Intercultural Readiness Check](#), a tool which assesses how curious employees are to other cultures, willingness to modify communication styles to be better understood within different cultural contexts and ability to improve or innovate one’s own techniques based on learning from other cultures.

Lots of networks sprung up from those in different parts of the value chain wanting to understand other regional counterparts and it undoubtedly did a lot to improve working relationships across the country.

But there was also a lesson; Sean recalled personal experience of unconscious bias when he built a program to develop global diverse leaders taking place across Europe, the US and Japan. He ran workshops which were highly participatory, inviting everyone to share their own expertise throughout. However, this expectation was itself based on western norms. Japanese counterparts felt uncomfortable taking part as they expected to hear from an experienced leader on what to do next and did not consider their own opinions ‘expert’ enough to share.

Courage, responsibility, and support

The panel concluded with a final piece of advice, relevant regardless of background.

Samin noted that it is hard to challenge things in a particularly corporate environment, especially right now as fearfulness over job retention is on the rise. But having that courage to speak out when you witness something you think is marginalising or not right is a personal choice. Noor echoes that despite the difficulty, doing this can help you understand whether you're in the right organisation for you. Ask yourself, does your leadership share your values?

Noor emphasised the importance, as someone from a diverse background, of having the right support networks in place. Having a personal champion who will push you to keep going on the tough days can make all the difference.

Sean had a message for line managers and leaders: ask what more you can do for your reports to help them 'bring their whole selves to work'. Managing is a privilege; don't forget the good that can come from encouraging someone to simply be themselves. As a natural extension of that sentiment, Sean also mentors for the [Healthcare Businesswomen's Association](#).

It's clear there is both an expectation and need for those responsible for structural change in our industry, to step up. Only by moving from a perspective of doing things that may or may not improve diversity as a by-product, to deliberately pursuing policies and initiatives which are solely intended to improve diversity and inclusion can the structural change needed take place.

Fittingly, the webinar concluded with a call for recruitment to join the [diversity interest group](#).