

From Diversity to Inclusion – A Coaching Journey

*Performance = Potential minus Interference*¹ is a well-known coaching formula that I decided needed greater scrutiny. In particular, how can I, as a coach, help reduce the interference arising out of diversity? While we each have a unique combination of interferences, for people from diverse backgrounds (ethnicity, gender, socio-economic etc) their diversity can be a key element of their interference.

As a woman of ethnic minority, typically the only person in the room that looked like me, how could coaching have helped me?

I am the child of Muslim, Kenyan Asian parents who came to study in England in the 1950s. My upbringing was modest but comfortable and in common with many first generation immigrant families there were certain expectations:

“education is hugely important as no-one can take it away from you”

“you will need to be better than best in order to succeed”

“no one is going to cut you any slack – you won’t get a second chance, you cannot afford to make mistakes”

“don’t make a fuss, just get on with it and prove you are good enough”

Not surprisingly, I worked hard at school and university and graduated from Durham with a degree in economics and law. Despite much family pressure to get a professional qualification I went into the City, joining the graduate trainee programme at Barings. I was the only woman on the programme and the first ‘brown person’ Barings Corporate Finance had employed. I had worked incredibly hard to get the role and now my upbringing meant I was very focused on proving that, despite ‘looking different’, I was just as good as everyone else. I did more, worked harder and was more focused than many of my peers. I got promoted and built a strong reputation but I came to work with my battle armour on and rarely let anyone get to know me. I was performing well at work but was lonely and unhappy. I gained a reputation for being ‘tough’ and ‘able to cope with anything’ which made it even harder to admit how much I was struggling.

As my career progressed and I become more senior, although I didn’t see myself as ‘brown’everyone else did.

This is the challenge faced by anyone with a visible difference. On the inside looking out you don’t see the difference, but you are reminded of it constantly by the reaction of others and you can never hide it. The instinct is to do everything you can to ‘fit in’. I became an expert at fitting in. For years I avoided all mention of the fact I was Muslim and went out of my way to chat to colleagues about common topics of interest such as golf and the theatre. I was proud of my heritage but avoided Indian food to ensure I did not come to work smelling of curry!

I had become a leader, but arguably by moving even further from myself.

Had I been coached, I could have explored more effectively the choices I was making to ‘hide’ who I really am, and could have found the right balance for me to be comfortable with my ethnicity and still feel part of the team. More crucially, coaching would have enabled me to develop an inclusive leadership style, leading by example through being authentic about my heritage and being a role model for others dealing with difference.

Having now become a coach, my approach focuses on providing clients from diverse backgrounds with the support that I would like to have had.

¹ The Inner Game of Tennis by W. Timothy Gallwey

While I did not have coaching support, I did benefit greatly from working for leaders who treated me equally as well as giving me plenty of opportunities. I took advantage of every opportunity I was given and learned to overlook unintended slights and ignore the patronising, if well-intentioned manner, in which much of the help was offered.

Gen Z entering the workforce today will not be so forgiving. Creating an inclusive culture where diverse views and opinions can thrive is now a business imperative to attract and retain the best talent and an expected core leadership competence.

I am passionate about helping leaders become more inclusive and am developing a coaching programme that draws out both the capabilities that the leader has in their existing 'toolkit', and maps out how they are perceived by their employees and where their blind spots are. Coaching is then used to deepen the leader's understanding of and exploration of the challenges that some may be experiencing in the workplace. This is done by creating a non-judgemental environment and psychologically safe place for them to think and hear their thoughts. It is combined with a detailed examination of the impact inclusive leadership can have on the performance of the business. With this enhanced self-awareness, the coaching then focuses on developing a confident, authentic inclusive leadership style and allows the leader to consider the structural and organisational changes they wish to deliver.

The goal is to help you become the authentic, inclusive leader you can be proud of.

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