

Talking purple

Purple power
Sarah Simcoe

I've been hearing a lot of talk recently about 'Purple Power'. It's a term used to describe how we harness the talents of people with a disability and listen to their voices in building inclusive working environments. I see this as a positive sign that the #PurpleTalk conversation is hitting the tables and airwaves in many organisations.

This is no mean feat when we understand what it actually means to be 'disability confident', and the challenges which need to be addressed by employers. The aims and objectives set out by the Department of Work and Pensions Disability Confident Campaign¹ are to: challenge attitudes towards disability; increase understanding of disability; remove barriers to disabled people and those with long-term health conditions in employment; and ensure that disabled people have the opportunities to fulfil their potential and realise their aspirations. This campaign, along with tools provided by the networking hub PurpleSpace, have informed my experience of what it takes to influence a disability-confident organisation. Most often, the challenges are around engaging employees and seeking the appropriate level of executive sponsorship and a senior leadership voice to help bang the drum.

Recent events indicate that a climate of intolerance and discrimination appears to be on the rise, and so it's vital that our major employers foster good leadership that respects diversity and inclusion at work. Real sustainable business change and a real workplace shift in culture, depend on inclusive senior leadership.

In my role, I'm fortunate to meet inclusive leaders across organisations, industries and sectors, pioneers who are helping to build real disability confidence; leaders such as Philip Rutnam, Civil Service Disability Champion, Gavin Bounds, SEED Executive Sponsor at Fujitsu, and Ashok Vaswani, Barclays Disability Champion. What I observe as a common trait of inclusive leadership, is a desire to ensure we are seeking feedback from all perspectives, that accessibility is for all and that, most importantly, we are listening to

those people affected by an organisation's disability-confident agenda.

Such leaders enable and encourage; they do not mimic and show disrespect. They inspire and lead; not dictate and judge. They lead by example and help to create a shared understanding of priorities, engaging and exciting the business that may be difficult to reach and they display a genuine interest and a desire to help.

The vehicle used by inclusive leaders, and the vehicle that I see used above all others, is the setup of the employee network. It's a tried and tested way of directly engaging disabled employees and accessing the voice of the lived experience. In a recent visit to a Civil Service roundtable session, leadership and employee networks from the Cabinet Office, Financial Conduct Authority and Land Registry all came together to share their collective experience of disability confidence, of educating managers and about the value of employee networks as a vehicle for positive change. When we can remove barriers internally and externally, organisations can come together across industries and sectors to share inspiring examples of removing stigma and of positively influencing and affecting key processes. This proves the power of our personal stories in raising awareness and identifying role models flourishing in the workplace – all focusing on the greater good.

Employee networks come in all shapes and sizes, and like dress sizes, one size really does not fit all. No one network approach is more effective than another, but the key is to be clear on the primary purpose, your key objectives and to have clear success criteria. In my workplace, SEED (Support and Engage Employees with Disabilities) started life in 2013 as a peer network. Over time it has evolved into a business outcome and action-orientated Network directly influencing the workplace culture and operating practices within Fujitsu UK and Ireland. As a result, the number of employees sharing a disability or health condition has increased from 2.8 per cent of the workforce in 2015, to 5.7 per cent in

December 2016, and SEED membership has increased by 45 per cent since 2015.²

Sustaining these networks requires hard work, talent and thoughtful leadership, something I learned very quickly. It takes a clear strategy and a common goal aligned to the organisational values. It also requires efficient planning and a business outcome focus. Having a clear view of the 'and' game and the 'end' game can help to support culture change. A good understanding about how you excite and engage human beings is essential, and when this is done effectively, the employee networks become true vehicles for change.

Purple Power means embracing, recruiting, developing and retaining purple talent. But first, we must ensure that we are demonstrating inclusive leadership. With this comes the need to display the behaviours that you wish to resonate through every pore of your organisation. Leading from the front, and engaging directly with disabled employees via an employee network, organised around a common goal, helps to drive that positive business change and ensure that we all have the opportunity to flourish – now that is real Purple Power.

References

- 1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/disability-confident-campaign> (accessed 2 March 2017).
- 2 Internal statistics sourced via SEED and from quarterly Diversity & Inclusion reports generated by HR Information Systems.



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