



Taking the next steps for success

Sunita Patel calls for an even greater focus on socio-economic diversity in organisations, and says staff from underrepresented backgrounds need to be given the tools to succeed and do great things for our communities

As a British Indian woman from a working class background, and with a decade of experience in local government, I've never felt more comfortable, confident, proud and empowered at work as when I look around and see people like me. And being relatively new to the world of executive search, it surprises me how challenging some of our clients and candidates find not just talking about, but making, impactful decisions around equalities, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Recent years have seen a drive to increase diversity in organisations, focused primarily on gender and ethnicity. However, forward-looking organisations across industries are now also looking at how to increase socio-economic diversity as part of this big agenda.

Senior leaders across local government are making great efforts in this space, but there is a long way to go to ensure top teams are truly representative of the communities they serve. It's not enough to simply say you're committed to EDI – actions speak louder than words, and as leaders it's in your hands to make the huge difference local government needs. *Spiderman* wasn't wrong when he gave us the well-loved gem 'with great power comes great responsibility'.

We work with organisations across the country, and at Starfish we're committed to delivering a diverse and inclusive candidate pool for every role we support. But, moving from shortlist to appointment is where the stats often start to shift.

There are of course risks in appointing a less experienced candidate. It requires greater investment, organisational support and energy to develop talent, but the long-term benefits are absolutely worth it. So, before making the appointment, take some time to reflect on your communities and workforce – would the appointment inspire and motivate them, knowing that the person is just like them? Can your experienced team nurture and support the talent in front of you? And do you as a leader truly value difference?

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It's no secret those with protected characteristics, and often people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, may find it difficult to progress to senior leadership roles. And in order to inspire people to step forward when big opportunities become available, we must lead by example, and understand the importance of elevating others.

So, before the crunch point of an appointment, what role we can all personally play to help underrepresented people progress into senior roles across local government and create socially inclusive organisations? Two things as a starting point: – firstly 'spot the talent' and

secondly 'give people confidence to do the job and get through the recruitment process'.

Senior leadership recruitment and the rigorous and lengthy process can be quite a daunting prospect for many. The fear of failing, or not articulating themselves well enough undoubtedly holds good people back. In some sectors, candidates are now given interview questions in advance so they can fully prepare and don't feel caught out on the day.

I heard a great example from Hackney LBC recently about how they redesigned their library

structure. Many of the staff were from Black and global majority backgrounds and had been part of the workforce for decades. The thought of applying and interviewing for the new roles, which were graded significantly higher, was terrifying for them. Hackney leaders recognised this and worked with an external diversity and inclusion specialist organisation to co-design the recruitment process with the staff. They discussed interview themes, questions, and assessment criteria with them, and coached them so they felt prepared and confident, and most importantly could feel genuine trust in the process.

Helping people to present their best selves goes a long way and can result in a truly representative workforce. Steve Jobs put it beautifully when he said: 'Leadership is about inspiring people to do things they never thought they could.'

Giving staff from underrepresented backgrounds the tools to succeed will allow them to do great things for our communities.

A diverse and socially inclusive employee population excels best under a diverse leadership team but hiring for diversity is only the beginning. Lasting success is only found when that team is truly committed to inclusivity in every aspect of their organisational culture.

Building a visibly diverse workforce signals a commitment to inclusion and improving society. It also benefits an organisation's reputation and image.

We can continue to do the same things every day, but if we put others first by helping them to succeed in an otherwise unachievable space, it will transform us as leaders. We all have the power to change the outlook of ours and other people's lives, and need to invest time in developing ourselves and more importantly, those around us. ■

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