



## HOW TO CRACK THE CULTURAL CEILING

### How to benefit from cultural diversity

1. Identify where you have complex challenges or a need for innovative thinking. Where have your 'tried and true' approaches failed to deliver inclusion?
2. Make sure you have strong levels of diversity, especially in those areas. If necessary, recruit for diversity. Remember, a diverse team will outperform talented individuals particularly when the issue is tricky.
3. Check that every member of your diverse teams shares the same sense of purpose and the same goals. Thinking differently is good but wanting fundamentally different things is not!
4. Train team members to probe the unstated assumptions beneath a colleague's words and, in turn, to make their own assumptions transparent to others. This helps people to see the relevance of a different perspective and allows their own mental models to be challenged.
5. Build the protocols and practices that create an inclusive culture and help each person, whatever their background, to feel they belong and can contribute.

### *Current approaches have failed*

This week, we welcomed the report 'Cracking the Cultural Ceiling', published by the Diversity Council of Australia (DCA). The report describes how employees with an Asian background are faring in the Australian workplace. What does it tell us? Actually, nothing new. But this point in itself is worth highlighting. It demonstrates that, in Australia, where leadership is concerned, it is still Anglo-Celt males that rule. And it isn't just Asian employees that struggle to break through into senior ranks. Other groups also face difficulties. Thus the dispiriting truth is that the DCA report is no different in its conclusions from earlier research, including our first UGM data on the topic, published as long ago as 1996 and broadcast in the SBS television documentary 'The Business Advantage'. While there has certainly been some progress, it has been piecemeal, inconsistent and depressingly little. Why is this and what can we do about it?

### *Waking up corporate Australia*

Australia is one of the most culturally diverse societies. One in two Australians was born overseas or has a parent who was born elsewhere, and census data reveals more than 300 different ethnic groups. When we focus on graduates from an Asian background, we see their number is growing each year. In some sectors, the graduate intake has become predominantly Asian. This shouldn't be surprising: 15% of Australians with an Anglo-Celt background currently go to university, but the figure for young people with an Asian background is 30%.

In fact, whatever your own ethnicity, the reality of today's Australia is that you most likely work with colleagues whose cultural background is significantly different from yours. But this demographic shift has not played out smoothly. Employees with an Asian background are under-represented in more senior roles, despite their qualifications. There are invisible barriers that prevent advancement. Too often the result is careers stall and talent goes untapped. What's going wrong?

### *A complex problem requiring careful analysis*

The source of the problem is that each person has been profoundly shaped by their cultural identity and by the ways of thinking prioritised in their first language. These deep aspects of identity cannot be conveniently set aside when a person comes to work, as if culture was like a coat that can be hung up on a peg and collected later on the way home. Studies on acculturation confirm that it's unrealistic to expect a newcomer to fit in perfectly. It's too hard because 'fitting in perfectly' involves becoming bilingual and bicultural – goals way beyond the realistic expectation of most professional migrants, coming as part of what is called a 'first generation' group.

Miscommunication can happen at various levels and have more than one cause. Diverging styles can lead to frustration, resentment and negative evaluations on all sides. In addition, management techniques developed for the homogeneous workforce of the past fail to deliver positive results today.

But you might be wondering: why does all this matter – beyond the obvious values of equity and fairness? It matters because there is overwhelming evidence that diverse teams are more innovative than *either* talented individuals working alone *or* teams where everyone is pretty much the same. Diversity outperforms sameness every time.

### *Is 'Unconscious Bias Training' the solution?*

The argument is that we all carry biases, even unconsciously; Asian employees are not advancing in proportion to their numbers; the cause must be bias, both in the system and on the part of their managers. So let's make our managers aware of their biases and then we'll have a level playing field.

But many organisations find that such approaches are overly simplistic. When the dust settles after the anti-bias training, there is no significant difference in the numbers of employees from non-Anglo backgrounds moving up the ranks. In fact, things can get worse. The same performance problems persist but now managers feel they can't ask for help without being labelled 'biased' – or worse. A veil of political correctness sweeps the problem out of sight.

Clearly, there will always be a percentage of people with racist attitudes and a need to remain vigilant in case bias creeps back into the system. But tackling the issue this way is not in itself enough. Even where bias can be proved, it is a positive behavioural approach that makes what's required clear to all.

### *Building an inclusive culture is the real key*

Asian employees welcome having Australian workplace culture 'decoded' in ways that make sense. This means learning how to effectively manage the impression being conveyed to others. Is it what was intended? Does it serve the person's best interests? How can people come across as they'd like, while remaining true to their own identity?

The magic key is an organisation's ability to build an inclusive culture, where everyone feels they belong and can contribute. We've found this needs to be practical, behavioural and measurable. Things can't be left at an abstract level of values and principles. Our recent data has shown there are some quite specific protocols and practices that help to leverage the dividend inherent in diversity. In the end, good relations are about people and the extent to which they know how to work well together. Instead of feeling frustrated by differences, people discover how to benefit from them and even to enjoy them.