



UK Advisory Council Meeting

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How do we help non-diverse leaders be the best possible allies?

We have to recognise that executives are apprehensive about getting their D&I approach wrong – particularly when executive teams are themselves often far from diverse. Even if individual executives recognise and believe in the opportunity, fear too frequently leads to inaction. So, what can great companies and great allies do differently that will give them the confidence to push this agenda forward?

This was the focus of Hedley May's first Advisory Council meeting of 2023. We were delighted to be joined by the Group CFO at a FTSE 250 organisation, who openly discussed their company's D&I strategies, successes, and shortcomings having recently taken on D&I executive sponsorship.

In an honest and introspective discussion, several key themes emerged.

Have the courage to risk missteps.

The most important first step is to start *somewhere*, rather than trying to formulate the 'perfect' D&I strategy. It is understandable to be apprehensive about alienating some groups by focusing on others first.

One participant in our discussion said:

"One of the biggest barriers I've found is that people find reasons to say 'don't do it', often asking 'what about this group? What about all these other people you're going to make feel marginalised if your D&I policies don't focus on them?'"

But our Council noted that sometimes the only way to make a start is by initially focusing on areas where you have the most data to measure change, and then expanding outwards.

D&I requires boldness. It is important that D&I is felt within the business strategy – with tangible goals. Leaders should be incentivised to meet their objectives, but there should also be consequences for failing to do so. Everyone needs to see that the game has changed – and that leadership is changing with it. And while it can be easier to focus on visual diversity than diversity of thought, the latter is critical – and should be highly prized.

This is not something that will happen overnight. Everyone will make mistakes – and the best of plans can be made to change. The crucial thing is to pair ambition with the right intent, made in good faith.

"Mistakes within the D&I space will happen very often, especially for big, global organisations. What works in one place can offend someone somewhere else. Our clients and customers hold us to account for that. But when we make mistakes, we've learned that it's better to say that we don't know everything. It's a journey for us. And people are forgiving."

A psychologically safe environment for expressing different views.

The D&I agenda will inevitably raise disagreements. So long as different views are expressed in good faith, it is critical that everyone feels comfortable raising their concerns. An environment characterised by psychological safety means that resistance will not be forced underground. Companies should bring honest (and, sometimes, uncomfortable) debate into the open. That means having empathy for everyone's fears – including non-diverse populations who express apprehensions about change. As one participant put it:

"Everybody has felt excluded at some point – everybody can relate to that emotion".

Where non-diverse ExCo sponsors often fall short, it is largely down to discomfort rather than resistance: an instinct to avoid saying anything that might rock the boat either way.

"85% of our senior leadership team are white men over 50. To be blunt, that's a population we need to get on board. Some won't, but for the majority, it's not that they don't want to do it; they just have no idea where to start. They're so worried about offending people".

A common concern is that trying to provide them with 'training' in this area might be seen as patronising. Instead, it can be framed as an exploration of inclusive leadership: it is not about 'fixing' shortcomings, but rather about equipping executives with skills that will make them more inclusive and effective leaders in their markets.

Recent thinking by Hedley May has also delved into how leaders can embrace '[unlocking the potential of people 'not like me'](#)', and '[stepping up to the diversity challenge](#)'.



Keep emphasising the business imperative for diversity.

As strong as the moral case for more diversity and inclusion is, resistance is often most persuasively answered by speaking to the business imperative. The D&I agenda should provide organisations the ability to develop, attract and retain top talent. An inclusive culture is one that motivates people to bring their 'A-game' to work day after day, and customers, and new-generation talent increasingly want – and expect – diversity.

Make the case that promoting more diverse hires is not about accepting a less qualified candidate in order to meet a quota, but recruiting for potential rather than experience – which is a way to raise the bar rather than lower it. As one participant put it:

“we’ve managed to change people’s mindsets away from the idea that we will always recruit the best person to we will always give talent a chance”.

The hardest audience to reach can be those working at an already-successful company, who might ask, “why fix what isn’t broken?” One message that can resonate with such an audience is that D&I is not about upsetting what is successful, but future-proofing the business in a world that demands continuous improvement. You can start from a position of strength, but what will the world look like in five or ten years: for example, where will you get your talent, and where will your clients be?

“It’s the right thing to do – but if that’s not what people are interested in, that’s okay. Do it because it will make you a better company.”

Changing mindsets in the middle: D&I isn’t a zero-sum game.

Resistance to D&I often feels most pronounced among people at the middle of organisations, rather than the executives setting strategy, or newcomers at the bottom of the organisation who expect more. As one participant in our discussion put it:

“whatever the messages that come from the top and whatever the demand is from the bottom, it’s the behaviours and attitudes of that middle section of the organisation that will determine success or failure”.

For many people, D&I can appear to be a zero-sum game: ***if you win, I lose***. It can seem that the D&I agenda is a top-down imposition, driven by “woke” and political forces unconnected with reality on the ground. Fear of alienating this cohort can make it particularly difficult for non-diverse executives to take on the D&I agenda.

The imperative is to challenge this zero-sum narrative – diversity should simply be viewed ***“as covering each other’s blind spots.”***

The Council emphasised the importance of having persuasive answers to the ***“what’s in it for me?”*** questions raised by the people who fear losing out. Macro-level messaging on the case for D&I can sometimes seem condescending and out of touch. To change mindsets in the middle, these questions need to be approached at a more individual level, for example:

how does more diversity help my team or function address the challenges we face every day? Crucially, the case needs to be made most vocally by those non-diverse executives who are unafraid to raise their heads above the parapet.

About us

Hedley May is a global executive search firm dedicated to finding exceptional talent to transform Boards and executive leadership teams. We help create a better future through our commitment to doing the right thing for our clients, candidates and the communities we serve.

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