

DIVERSITY & YOUR BUSINESS

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How effective is your diversity agenda Can you measure its impact?

By Simon Smethurst-McIntyre, Managing Director of Equality Foundation

Over the last 10 years or more, organisations across the public, and private sector have invested an incredible amount of time and money on their equality and diversity agendas. For most, the pure driver for this has been compliance, either regulatory or legislative, and for those organisations, simply being compliant as measured by their regulator or the law has been sufficient evidence that their agenda is working.

But what about other organisations? Organisations that want to go beyond compliance to actually do something with diversity. The work of Thomas and Ely, two Harvard academics, suggested that organisations fall into one of three paradigms for their diversity work and agenda. They are either in the discrimination and fairness paradigm, concentrating on legislative

compliance and anti discrimination, the access and legitimacy paradigm, focusing their efforts on increasing diversity and positive action, or they are in the strategic paradigm, understanding that diversity enhances all aspects of an organisation's work, and that it is not just about compliance or numbers.

In any organisation there is almost always a disconnect between the way the organisation wants to view diversity and how it is actually viewed across the organisation. The challenge for most organisations is to firstly understand that this exists and then to measure how big this gap is, and how successful their diversity strategy has been at closing it.

In reality most diversity strategies are of the "see what sticks approach", throw as much

activity at the "issue" and see what happens.

At Equality Foundation we believe the time has come for this to change. For organisations to look at the success of their agendas in more sophisticated ways, to respect that diversity is about complexity so measuring its success should be a sophisticated process. The way to measure the success of a diversity agenda isn't to achieve another level on a government standard or receive another star from the audit commission, like children in a classroom. Organisations need to carry out more sophisticated reviews that help inform the work they are doing and the work they need to do, reviews need to look at leadership, visions, strategy and plans, internal and external relationships, policies and procedures not just tick boxes.

The Diversity Business Barometer

Helping you find the impact

The Diversity Business Barometer (DBB) is a standalone tool, but can be also be used as a precursory analysis to a full diversity assessment or audit, e.g. the Framework for Excellence in Equality and Diversity (FEED). DBB is a tool that organisations can use to assess the impact of their diversity and equality work and to consider the journey the organisation has made to date.

It provides information on the paradigm of diversity that is currently operating in the organisation; the depth and breadth of knowledge of the subject; and offers an indication of the extent to which diversity and equality is used in:

- The demonstration of leadership;
- Developing organisational visions, strategies, and plans;
- Developing effective internal and external relationships; and
- Developing organisational processes and policies.

The Process

The Diversity Business Barometer is a 3-stage process that is designed to allow organisations to gather initial data and use it to construct a vision and a set of action points for its continued work in the subject.

Stage 1 – Questionnaire:

Stage 1 involves the development and administering of a bespoke questionnaire that will be a mixture of pre-set and organisational specific

questions to elicit how diversity and equality is currently used in the organisation. To achieve as robust information as possible, it is suggested everyone in the organisation is invited to participate in completing the questionnaire. The questionnaire itself is completed on-line although paper and alternative formats are also available. However the primary advantage with online completion is that regular updates on progress and percentage completion are possible. The ultimate output from Stage 1 is data that can be used for planning purposes and to inform Stages 2 and 3.

Stage 2 – Analysis & Report:

Once the data from the questionnaire is available, EFL will analyse it; and prepare and present a report detailing our findings, conclusions and recommendations for future work.

Stage 3 – Developing a Vision:

Once the organisation has had time to digest the information from the report, EFL will work with organisational thinkers to develop their vision for diversity; and accompanying plans.

The DBB can also be a useful pre-inspection tool to ensure that the organisation and its staff are aware of diversity and for the organisation to identify potential gaps in knowledge or work.

For more information on how DBB can support your organisation in moving your strategy forward contact Robin Williams on 07799 641021 or r.williams@equalityfoundation.com

For most organisations the scatter gun approach taken to Diversity and the lack of measurement means that its impact is nothing but a question mark



What You Know Is what you know the issue rather than what you don't?

By Peter Campbell, Lead Consultant

A dear friend once told me a little aphorism that I'd like to share with you. He said "what you know is insignificant compared with what you don't know". If you believe this to be true, there isn't much else in the world that offers more liberation. I share that pithy statement with you because I want to use it as the backdrop to what I want to discuss.

Over the last 7 - 10 years there has been a general move from independent housing associations to groups of organisations that share common values, infrastructure and services. Rather than any slow down in this as we move forward, I believe there will instead be relentless encouragement from the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) for independent organisations to join a group, and for established groups to get even larger.

But, what does that mean for groups? Well, what has happened in some current groups is that divergent organisations have come together, with members of the organisation normally scattered far afield. Consequently I don't believe it's unusual for a group to contain sister organisations situated, one in a major city or conurbation with a very ethnically diverse population and another in a more rural setting with, in terms of ethnicity an almost homogenous demographic profile. For an observer looking at this mix of organisations it could be easy to conclude that the diversity of the organisation and the people they serve offer tremendous opportunities for the sharing of information; learning; and the challenging of institutionalised mental models and norms; but is this the case?

The advancement of the social agenda in the UK, Europe, and other parts of the world has seen a plethora of legislation and regulatory frameworks that significantly affect the way organisations function. This is no less the case for Housing Groups and individual associations.

In recent years we have seen the introduction of a number of a number of new pieces of anti-discrimination legislation, which as you almost



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certainly know are currently going through a major overhaul and consolidation which is slowly making its way through parliament; there is also the Housing Corporation's Regulatory Code, which is still current until the TSA have developed its new framework. All of these challenge housing groups and associations to ensure that in the delivery of their services they take account of diversity. This places responsibility on executives to demonstrate the type of leadership that encourages their employees to fully embrace diversity and equality when designing, developing and delivering products and services.

In the last issue of the EFL newsletter we noted that the government is using equality impact assessments to mandate organisations to look again at what impact organisational policies, procedures, and functions have on diverse customers and employees. For housing groups that have diverse members, there is often a perception that housing associations situated in cities serving diverse populations have a greater understanding of diversity, particularly in terms ethnicity and related issues such as religion and belief or culture. The same can be said for those organisations that traditionally provide accommodation and care for people who are more senior in age. Where the perception is often that they have

knowledge about disability, access, and mobility.

Although on a certain level those perceptions may be accurate, an alternative viewpoint can bring us back to the above aphorism that is "what we know is insignificant compared to what we don't know. To put it into context, our current frame of reference may not adequately underpin the understanding of needs of tenants and other stakeholders represented in diverse groups. If this is true; accepting and working with this hypotheses places a new layer of complexity on an organisation's diversity agenda.

As a training consultant with over 18 years experience, I have worked with numerous people from many organisations. Often when I deliver diversity training to customers and their employees, particularly those situated in big conurbations, participants often query why they need to be on a training course because of course they work with diversity every day and they treat people fairly and don't discriminate against them. It's not until their view of diversity is explored that it is realised that so little is based on robust information gleaned from the people they serve. Rather, at best the information is derived from formalised data collection, e.g. the census classification; local authority or National Health Service monitoring; or

organisational perceptions that have never been rigorously tested.

Worse still the information is from traditional stereotyping that has served the organisation well over many years. At a very basic level these stereotypes are a postcode lottery, where people from troublesome council estates are collectively seen as a problem, as was the case when I worked with a maintenance team of a recently formed ALMO who describe everyone from one of their council estates as scum. When faced with people who are operating purely on the basis of what they know, the challenge is to help them give up, or cease to believe their operating assumption or mental map. Often the difficulty here is that unlike the maintenance people from the ALMO who had an openly bigoted view about the people from a council estate, most people I work with, will eloquently express the principles of diversity and equality - which resides in their conscious mind, but through

This should be concerning, particularly for those housing groups as described above, because it is the associations that deal with diverse groups of people that are perceived to know about the subject of diversity. However, from my experience, their knowledge of ethnicity, religion, and even disability often creates a myopia to the greater and more truer representation of diversity, which is best described by human individualisation. This individualisation is not necessarily rooted in the external characteristics of a person, but more related to their internal aspirations about life, self growth, work, family etc. Naturally these things are not easily quantified with a head-count, but through a disciplined approach to the acquiring and interpreting of quality data, and through meaningful dialogue with the individuals concerned.

An over-reliance on what we know leads us to default assumptions that drive our perceptions and that in turn

authority I have worked with - training their staff for quite a few years, where I have not seen a single person with an externally visible disability, (i.e. being blind, deaf etc) at one of my sessions. The question then is do they not have people with disabilities working for them? Well I know that is not true because I have trained some of their people with disabilities on bespoke courses for the disabled. Other organisations I have worked with that care for our citizens that are more senior in age, complain that they are a nuisance because they are too demanding. In that circumstance the question to be asked is, if they are receivers of a service (customers), why shouldn't they be demanding?

As the 21st Century continues to throw up new challenges for housing associations and groups, their precedence has to be the moving from a product orientated organisation, where customer engagement relies on a push marketing strategy, to one which relates to customers advocacy. Where delighting customers is not restricted to the platitudes of good customer relations, but that customers are provided with high quality products and services that they helped to create. This can only happen when they are given the opportunity to fully consult with the organisation. These need to be delivered in a way that best suits their requirements, even if the vehicle for creation and delivery lies outside the host organisation. In short, that they receive excellence. Now organisations will say "we involve our customers through consultation". However, the result of consultation is often a forgone conclusion because:

- 1) although customers are far more knowledgeable than they ever have been, they are rarely given sufficient knowledge about the internal workings of the organisation to offer a reasoned critique of performance;
- 2) customers are rarely involved in the framing of questions for review; and
- 3), often they are not given any real context for developing an approach that will challenge current organisational norms so they can be reframed to deliver excellence.

Consequently, the results of consultation exercises are instead a nagging and complaining dynamic that is usually between the organisation and

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discussion leakage from their unconscious often plays out in real time.

What I am describing is not unusual, that is because as humans we have a profound tendency to conceptualise in terms of discreet entities. We perceive the world as being formed of such entities as: cars, trains, ships, men, women, white people, black people, blind people, deaf people, Muslim, Christian, and Jews etc. It is therefore not surprising then that we bring those perceived entities into our own reality when we're at work. Often decision making is based on our perception of those entities, and the most interesting thing of all is we rarely question whether our meaning of these entities is accurate. This phenomenon may also explain why when we're familiar with something or someone, we can say with confidence "we know what that means", or we know what they are all about, and our unfamiliarity of something forces us to fill gaps with things we know.

influences our decisions, and populates our actions, and will continue to do so as long as that reliance pervades. It is that reliance on what they know which drives the maintenance workers in the ALMO I mentioned to use a series of single unpleasant incidents to sully the residents of an entire neighbourhood. Now their behaviour may have been extreme, but how often does the assumption we make about people influence our engagement with them; and even worse, how often are our assumptions written into organisational documents to form policy?

Whilst our reliance on what we know exists, it has the effect of stunting our capacity to explore new ways of seeing things, to see the world and people in different ways. An example of this is the way we perceive people with disabilities. No matter how forward thinking we believe our organisation to be, our perception and sometime treatment of people with disabilities dates back to pre Second World War. There is a very progressive local



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Peter Senge

the same people that always attend customer panels, residents boards etc. Often their cry is for adjustments that will ease the trauma of the real or presumed difficulties they encounter rather than the development of a framework that captures and uses customer information to forge change and continuous improvement.

Our mental models are the images, assumptions, and stories we carry in our minds about ourselves, other people, institutions, and every aspect of the world. They subtly distort our vision and determine what we see.

So what is the alternative? An approach is needed that allows the collective in an organisation to see a mirror image of who they are, and to view the issues that drive their behaviours which in turn influence internal and external interactions. This can lead to an open and honest dialogue about what the organisation wants to be; and the values, attitudes, and behaviours that will lead them to where they want to be.

However, that journey must start with a reframed view of diversity in organisations. We must move away from the categorisation of people based on eternal representations to a more sophisticated look at how individuals use self determination to pursue their life goals. And we must be able to use that information to create meaningful segmentations from which to design a template for the creation of products and services, and the delivery mechanisms that support them. For a lot of people this will require a fundamental paradigm shift where existing patterns of thinking are dismantled and replaced with a fresh outlook and where old ways of seeing things are seen through alternative lenses that are not yet been clouded by pre-existing perceptions. In fact there needs to be a passion for exploring new experiences and the challenging of current business and behavioural norms. Peter Senge explains it thus; “our mental models are the images, assumptions, and stories we carry in our minds about ourselves, other people, institutions, and every aspect of the world. They subtly distort our vision and determine what we see. We cannot navigate our way through the complex environments of the world without cognitive mental models, but by definition they are flawed in some way.”

The starting point for challenging mental models is having that reflective dialogue as discussed above, and using it to pursue the experimenting of new ways of thinking. For Housing Groups, this new way of thinking is almost certainly hidden in the minds of individuals rather than in distinct

associations. That is true for one group the Equality Foundation is currently working with, where the force of change in discovering a new paradigm of diversity that is not located in a big English city, but in the minds of individuals (and increasing a critical mass of people) in associations located in smaller rural areas. There could be many reasons for this, one could be that the lack of minority ethnic groups has encouraged them to find a new definition of diversity to latch on to; so they are now moving toward using diversity as a way of gathering information about individual customers, and questioning how services can be reshaped to meet individual requirements.

At the Equality Foundation our primary goal is to help organisations capture the essences of human interactions and to use the knowledge in ways that are productive for both customers and the organisation alike. Our commitment to diversity does not only lay in the seven/eight official strands, it is more attuned to the recognition of individuals with their flaws and strengths. To help humans excel, organisations must support them to manage and where possible improve on their flaws, but just as important is to use their strengths whilst growing them in the process.

Equality Foundation can help your organisation to reframe its approach to this subject whether that is through change management, development and facilitation of visions and strategies, simple training, carrying out audits and assessments or even becoming a critical friend, we can help. For more information contact our business development manager, Robin Williams on 07815 288260 or email him directly on r.williams@equalityfoundation.com.



To subscribe to receive our newsletter and briefing updates directly please visit our website www.equalityfoundation.com

If you feel that our unique way of looking at Diversity fits with your business and would like to discuss your consultancy or training requirements please contact our business development manager, Robin Williams on 07815 288260 or r.williams@equalityfoundation.com