

Power of Language and Bias Webinar – Takeaways

Lunch & Learn Series with BCohCo

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Power of Language and Bias Webinar – Takeaways

The ELFA D&I Committee has launched a Lunch & Learn series with BCohCo, and for our inaugural session this quarter we focused on the Power of Language and Bias. The session was presented by Katie DonovanAdekanmbi, Inclusion and Cohesion Specialist at BCohCo. BCohCo is a learning and development organisation specialising in Diversity, Inclusion, Cohesion and Equality (DICE). This enlightening session aimed to improve our understanding of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and provide practical tools to manage and mitigate biases in the workplace and beyond.

The webinar commenced with a brief discussion of the importance of understanding our internal dialogue. Recognising why we employ certain words and how this affects our thoughts and feelings is important, as our perspectives influence our decision making processes.

Key Takeaways

- The importance of not only recruiting diverse talent but also retaining talent was highlighted.
- Inclusion is broader than just diversity; it encompasses various visible and often invisible characteristics. Therefore, understanding, accommodating and continuously updating our knowledge is essential so that it can be deployed to support talent retention.
- Language is the mirror to our values and principles. It tells a story about who we are and reflects our belief system. Therefore, employing language wisely and listening actively is crucial.
- Equality is the destination, while equity is the vehicle that will get us there. Therefore, we should strive to understand and address the unique needs of individuals to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential.
- There is an intergenerational issue when it comes to language. Language is constantly evolving, reflecting the changing society in which it is used. Staying informed and adaptable is key to improving communication and understanding.
- The unconscious mind operates 200,000 times faster than the conscious mind. Therefore, it is important to regularly reflect on our biases and take proactive steps to mitigate their influence on our behaviour and decisions.
- Apologise when you have hurt someone with your language. Intent only matters after you have addressed the impact. Always prioritise acknowledging your mistake and the potential harm caused before trying to explain your intention.
- Awareness around D&I is growing as organisations recognise the value of providing personalised adjustments based on individual needs, which contributes to staff retention. Thus, investing in DEI initiatives should go beyond just a tick box exercise if we want to create a truly inclusive workplace.

Inclusion

Katie introduced the DICE framework, explaining that while diversity often refers to the nine protected characteristics, inclusion is a much broader concept. She used the analogy that it is not just about being invited to the party, it's also about being asked to dance. Inclusion very often refers to having a voice in the room, but it is crucial we acknowledge that not everyone may feel comfortable being in the spotlight.

Cohesion and Cross-Cultural Literacy

It was highlighted that we currently live in the most diverse generation and society in the UK. Therefore, developing our cross-cultural literacy on all identities – such as Race, Religion and Belief, Age, Sexuality, and Gender Expression – is essential. This will enable us to live, work, and thrive together, building cohesive communities where individuals can be their authentic selves.

The distinction was made between equality and equity: equality is the destination, while equity is the vehicle used to get there. Equity requires a sophisticated approach, considering individuals' economic, social and historical backgrounds to level the playing field. This includes making reasonable adjustments not only for visible disabilities but also for gender equity, race equity, LGBTQ+ community equity, etc.

Social media has increased transparency in management and board structures, highlighting a growing trend among organisations to provide personalised adjustments based on individual needs, as they begin to understand its value in contributing to staff retention, which has been recognised as a key priority alongside recruiting diverse talent.

The session also covered the importance of the Cross-Cultural Quotient of an individual's intelligence in today's globalised workplace. This is the ability to cross divides – between geographies, generations, sectors, specialisations, backgrounds and beliefs – and thrive in multiple cultures. Organisations are now assessing candidates' Cross-Cultural Quotient in the hiring process to ensure they do not hold radical or toxic perspectives.

Nine Protected Characteristics of The Equality Act

The discussion then moved to considering the nine protected characteristics of The Equality Act: Age, Disability, Gender Reassignment, Marriage and Civil Partnership, Pregnancy and Maternity, Race, Religion and Belief, Sex and Sexual Orientation. Additional factors that could also be considered include economic status, menopause, hair colour/texture and size. The concept of intersectionality between these characteristics was highlighted, where individuals may experience multiple identity markers that overlap and compound their experiences.

While it is important to be able to measure an individual's experiences, care needs to be taken to not limit individuals to categories, as this can create mental barriers that the individual must then navigate.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was referenced, which outlines self-actualisation through five building blocks: Physiological, Safety, Social, Esteem and Self-Actualisation. Mental barriers can limit an individual's progress; therefore, we need to consider how our biases and behaviours can hinder the trajectory of others on their journey to self-actualisation.

Language and Biases

The session explored how biases manifest in our language and behaviour – it is important to recognise and address these biases in our systems. The question was posed: "Can you be prejudiced, and not discriminate?" The answer was yes, as prejudice is an attitude and discrimination is an action. An activity involving a language traffic light system generated an interesting discussion which helped to understand which terms are acceptable today and why certain terms are no longer acceptable, which highlighted the importance of awareness and sensitivity in language use.

Microaggressions

Microaggressions are subtle yet offensive comments or actions, which can reflect our biases, values and principles. The concept of language as a mirror to our values and principles was emphasised; it tells a story about who we are and what our belief systems are.

Practical advice was provided for using inclusive language and ensuring that our words are considerate and demonstrate respect, fairness, and understanding of others. This includes body language, such as demeanour and tone of voice. However, it is essential to be mindful of individuals living with disabilities who may use their senses differently. The session concluded with a starter toolbox of phrases to navigate uncomfortable conversations and encourage discussion and reflection.

Conclusion

The session was insightful and explored the power of language in promoting inclusivity and mitigating bias and discrimination. By developing cross-cultural literacy, practising inclusive communication and continuously reflecting on our biases, we can build a more inclusive and equitable workplace and society for all.

Next Lunch & Learn Session

We look forward to our next session with BCohCo on Wednesday 18th September 2024, where we will be discussing Unconscious Bias.

About ELFA:

ELFA is a professional trade association comprised of European leveraged finance investors from more than 60 institutional fixed income managers, including investment advisors, insurance companies, and pension funds. ELFA seeks to support the growth and resilience of the leveraged finance market while acting as the voice of its investor community by promoting transparency and facilitating engagement among European leveraged finance market participants. For more information please visit ELFA's website: www.elfainvestors.com.

European Leveraged Finance Association

35 Ballards Lane, London N3 1XW

T +44 (0)7921 384457

E support@elfainvestors.com

