

# Why diversity and inclusion are so important to me



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Working in the Cabinet  
Office on Diversity &

Inclusion across an organisation of over 440,000, I consider myself fortunate to work on a daily basis with colleagues with expertise, passion and an unremitting drive to make the UK Civil Service a great place to work.

Reflecting on my D&I journey I often return to an early memory. Both my parents were

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nurses in the NHS and, after dad retired, ran a small Care Home. I remember one resident (Joe) very fondly. He was a war veteran with a speech impairment causing him great frustration when trying to communicate. Joe had specialists and speech therapists to assist his development, but nothing seemed to work. At around 10 years old, and following a heated exchange with his therapist, I remember picking up the augmentative therapy word board off the floor where it had been thrown and taking Joe through it. We continued with that learning together and Joe's speech slowly improved. It remains today one of my most rewarding experiences, and as you will see still resonates with me.

My career in the Civil Service has spanned over 18 years, most recently overseeing the UK's Sponsors Licencing regime. Additional responsibilities championing D&I and Social mobility in UKVI, being Co-Chair of the Home Office's Gender Equality Network and leading a People function overseeing over 4,500 staff across the UK and overseas have provided opportunities to really understand what people from all backgrounds, experiences and situations want from D&I.

My work with Dr Jill Armstrong on the Collaborating with Men research as Bye-Fellow at Murray Edwards focussing on



Jason Ghaboos leading a workshop discussion for the *Collaborating with Men* project.

gender inclusivity and workplace culture was life changing. Working alongside Jill, listening to the experiences of women and men across the public and private sectors to better understand the impacts to progression and workplace culture and identifying practical solutions.

Why is diversity and inclusion so important to me? It is integral to effective business delivery and is not just a 'nice to have'. Or even simply 'the right thing to do'. One of my mentors would often say to me 'would you make this decision if this was your own business?'. You wouldn't, for example, invest millions in a F1 car, fine tune the engine, calibrate the wheels, carefully select the tyres matching the terrain and then put little thought to the selection, motivation or development of the driver.

To create truly inclusive workplace culture the motive cannot simply be pastoral, intentions borne in isolation to core objectives and activity in silos from business delivery. Organisations must balance investment in their people, policies, process and practices to optimise business output. The most streamlined processes and finely articulated policies can be undone if the person operating within them is not equally invested in. Achieving alignment and pulling on these levers for improvement cohesively will support any business in delivering enhancements to productivity and utilisation. Just like our F1 car, without taking the time to calibrate the system could lead to sub-optimisation.

So where next for D&I? The focus of activity across sectors and organisations has often been through a single lens of an identity or characteristic – and with some real success. The value of this should not be underestimated. Grouping by ►►



characteristics can amplify voices that can too often go unheard, particularly when those voices are in the minority.

Yet, there is an opportunity to evolve. Not a paradigm shift, but an evolving approach to embrace an understanding that to continue to improve the outcomes of D&I practice a more nuanced approach may be needed. Whilst successes have certainly been delivered, individuals do not experience life through one label. Those voices being amplified, are they all really asking for the same things? Are they all having the same experiences? As a woman. Or a lesbian. Or a person of faith. We all have experiences, good and bad, that are made up of multiple facets, some directly or indirectly influenced by our characteristics or in fact not at all.

The Equality Act 2010 protects from discrimination or unfair treatment on



Jason Ghaboos pictured outside 10 Downing Street.

the basis of those outlined personal characteristics. As we take our next steps in professional D&I delivery we must consider the impact of continuing to group activity, experiences and interventions under these labels and reflect on whether this homogenised approach is the most optimal path to improve experiences and develop inclusivity. And, of course, a different approach can help in tackling those competing tensions (for time, investment, focus) that often arise between these 'groupings' when operating under identity characteristics.

The key is taking a meritocratic approach, to improve all whilst considering the nuances of individual experiences that could hold individuals back. I attended a grammar school in the top 100 list, a top 10 University and have worked as Bye-Fellow at Murray Edwards. I am also a mixed race, heterosexual man, from Burnley and from a working-class background. Which of these labels define me? Which reveals my motivations? Which one holds me back or spur me on? Which speaks most to my lived experience?

And somehow I am reminded of Joe when thinking on all of this. His speech didn't improve because of the specialist assessments, processes put in place by therapists or from labels as 'Disabled' or a 'war veteran' suffering from severe strokes. Joe improved as he was given the same opportunity to develop, whilst considering his individual needs as a person to build a genuine connection. I think there is something in that.