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Identifying Privilege

Presentation by

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Video and audio versions of this speech are available at

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About the presentation:

People with the most privilege often don't admit they have it, and may not even be aware of it. But the inability to recognize privilege can have severe consequences, acting as a roadblock to diversity. Is there a solution that will make people recognize their privilege and level the playing field?

Mariam Veiszadeh

I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

Anyone who knows me knows that I love to talk. I'm a chatterbox. I like to think that I'm pretty good at building rapport with my clients, too. Having spent just under a decade working as a lawyer, this skill often came in handy.

I remember one interstate client in particular. We got on like a house on fire. We spent months corresponding over email and chatting on the phone. I was the lead legal adviser on her matter.

The day came when we would finally meet face to face. I walk into the meeting room, and there she is. She's startled at first, and then gives me an odd look. She says, "You must work for Mariam?"

Dumbfounded, I pause and think about what she means. Then it dawns on me, she thinks I'm the legal secretary or assistant, perhaps? Clearly the voice she's used to hearing on the phone doesn't, in her mind, seem to correspond to the person standing in front of her. I reply, rather unconvincingly, "No, I AM Mariam".

I immediately start to doubt myself, and from there on in, all the months of rapport - building seem to go down the drain as I start again from scratch to win her over. I do win her over eventually, of course, but oh boy – it's a lot of energy wasted and yet another hit to my confidence.

I have quite a few other tales like that one, and I know plenty of other folks who do too. So today I want to reflect on how stereotyping, unconscious bias, and societal privilege operate to create an unequal playing field for diverse minority groups.

Let's start with privilege. Put simply, privilege is unearned advantage – enjoying rights or advantages or access simply by membership of a particular group or identity. You're part of a club.



Often privilege is granted, inherited, or acquired by default. Many of those who have it have played no part in it achieving it or obtaining it.

And here's the thing. I'm owning up to mine. I AM privileged. In fact, all of us are privileged. It's all relative and, ultimately, subjective.

Of course, those with the most amounts of privilege won't always own up to it - or even be conscious of it. As they say, privilege is largely invisible to those who have it.

I work as a Director for Diversity Council Australia, so I spend a lot of my day thinking about privilege and bias.

What we're exposed to every day feeds into the assumptions we make about people.

Think about it - whose faces do you see on your TV screens? Who holds the key positions in our top ranks of society? The norm is mostly MACS - male, Anglo, cis - gender & straight. Those faces, I have to say, show a general lack of diversity.

We all possess a strong tendency to favour people who physically resemble ourselves. It's called affinity bias. Experiments have shown that our brains categorise people by race in less than 100 milliseconds, and hiring decisions are made within the first 10 seconds of an interview. According to neuroscientist (and Nobel Peace Prize recipient) Eric Kandel, these biases and implicit associations are mostly unconscious.

Inherent societal privilege means that some of us are given a head start in the race of life, and it's because of that head start – a start which comes about because of privilege, not just because someone 'worked extra hard' – that they will always be miles ahead, even if all participants are running the same distance at the same speed and with the same ability, with the same amounts of "merit".



In today's business lexicon, 'diversity' has become shorthand for groups that aren't part of the existing workplace norm.

It's well documented that women from minority backgrounds face greater hurdles. They face barriers to full equality not just by virtue of their gender but because of their race, age, ethnicity, religion, disability or sexuality. They basically face a double whammy. It's known as intersectionality.

As an Australian woman, who's also originally from Afghanistan, and a Muslim, I have the Triple Whammy. I get sexism, I get racism, and I get Islamophobia.

Some people have a fan base. I have a troll base – and they're a clever lot who've mastered the art of the intersectional insult.

Ah, if had a dollar for every time I've heard someone say "But all appointments should be on merit!"

Of course they should be! But, of course, the people saying that are under the mistaken assumption that the current status quo is actually based on merit, and we know that it's not.

And here's the thing - those mounting the "merit" and "positive discrimination" argument – they'd want to be sure that they'd got their jobs entirely on merit, right? But what if they hadn't? What if the system had favoured them because they were MACS?

I recall a conversation I had with a couple of senior managers about Corporate Australia's shift to focus on Cultural Diversity within their leadership ranks. One of them was a woman of Asian Australian heritage, the other a man of Anglo - Celtic origin.

The man remarked, "There you go, another leg up for people like you" – referring to the woman. Looking shocked, she remained silent – but I couldn't.



I responded “When you extend a hand to someone who for too long has been pushed into the gutter while you’ve been comfortably walking the streets, that’s not a leg up or a handout – it’s simply levelling the playing field”.

Trying to achieve equality will inevitably feel like oppression to those who are accustomed to privilege.

Studies have shown us that simply to attain the same number of interviews as a person with an Anglo - sounding name, candidates with Indigenous, Middle Eastern & Chinese sounding names have to submit a ridiculous number of applications.

When compared to “Lisa” and “Andrew”,

- “Betty” and “Jimmy” had to submit 35 more applications
- “Nadine” and “Hassan” had to submit 64 more applications
- And “Ming” and “Hong” had to submit 68 more applications!

That’s just to secure an actual interview. What about when you’re at the interviewing table? Think about how affinity and unconscious bias may kick in.

You wouldn’t believe how many jokes I’ve had to crack to get interviewers to relax when they meet me.

About 40% of Australians have at least one parent born overseas (and no doubt this is also true of this room), but this diversity isn’t reflected across the top ranks of society. Only around 5% of leadership positions are held by people from non - European and non - Anglo Celtic backgrounds.

If we truly lived in a meritocracy, of course, there wouldn’t be anything wrong with that. And for culturally diverse women like me, well, the glass ceiling above us is double - glazed. That’s why I’ve got heels like this, to be able to smash through it!

Only a tiny percentage of ASX directors are culturally diverse women. At a CEO level it’s even worse, and the stats aren’t particularly better for culturally



diverse men. So what message does this send to the present generation of top HSC graduates, who are culturally diverse?

We know that minority groups spend up to 30% of their time worrying about how to fit in. They consciously cover their identities in order to be considered “normal”. Earlier on in my career, I try to find a way in social gatherings way of saying that I lived on the North Shore. That helped.

Imagine if folks like me didn't have to waste that much of our time worrying about how to fit in and didn't face additional hurdles - we could have spent that time and energy, oh, I don't know, maybe working towards becoming Directors or CEOs of ASX companies?

There will be those who will be sold on the moral case for why change is required to level the playing field, but there will be others who will only be convinced by dollar figures. Don't worry – I've got it covered! There's a thing called the diversity dividend. Gender diverse companies are 15% more likely to outperform the industry average, while those that are culturally diverse are 35% - yes, 35% - more likely to outperform. Diversity brings about a competitive advantage!

And we don't simply want tokenistic, visible, diversity – diversity is not just about a sprinkle of women and a dab of colour, it's something authentic, something which ultimately brings about diversity of thought and experience. The inevitable flow - on effect is that those businesses will be able to better understand and represent the needs of a multicultural Australia.

Let's pause at this point and consider just how privileged each of us are.

I'd like to ask you all to stand up. If you can't stand up, please raise one hand. I'm going to make a series of statements - if you answer yes to the statement, please remain standing (or keep your hand up). If the answer is no, please sit down (or put your hand down).

Did you have a job during high school? Those who did, please remain standing. If you didn't, please sit down.



Have you have been discriminated against, vilified, or abused, because of something you can't change about yourself?

At some point in your life, have you felt as if you have been one of the few people (or the only person) of your gender, race, faith, sexual orientation, or disability in an educational or professional setting?

Did you attend a public school for the majority of your education?

At this point, take a look around the room. The experience of life of the people who are standing may be dramatically different from those who are sitting. Let that realisation sink in for a moment. Those who are standing, thank you, please take your seats.

So how did that feel? Did you respond to the questions truthfully, or did you cover up parts of your identity?

While we're reflecting on that, I want you to think of a particular young person who falls into the category of people I've been speaking about. It could be your own child, or your neighbour, or just someone you know and love. Picture them right now - with all of the information we have... could you sit back and do nothing, knowing that person you care about could face such odds simply for being who they are?

There's never been a more important time for all of us to become more conscious of our unconscious biases. Just as we're conscious that we have a blind spot whilst driving, we need to make a concerted effort, each and every time, to turn our heads and take a look and adjust our assumptions accordingly.

We're living in era where divisive politics has successfully "otherised" diverse minority groups and normalised xenophobia.

We're constantly reading derogatory headlines about diverse minority groups - and what's even more troubling is that some of these remarks are made by our elected officials. When you excuse bigotry in words, you lay the framework to give bigotry in action a free pass.

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We know that we have an urgent issue of disenfranchisement among the youth, particularly youth of diverse backgrounds. We want them to reach for the stars, but the thing is - *you can't aspire to be someone you can't see.*

We have to acknowledge the inherent social and institutional barriers that exist, and we have to admit that there's a difference between equal opportunity and equitable opportunity. That's why additional measures are required, not to advantage some over others, not to give out handouts or a leg up, working to ensure we give everyone a fair go – particularly those who are already running as fast as they possibly can but still don't have a chance in hell of catching up.

And if the moral case hasn't convinced you, who in their right mind would say no to up to 35% greater financial return?

You can't address inequality equally. I believe we need to consider targets for those industries where diversity of all kinds is lacking. Why? Because, as they say, 'the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results'.

The existing status quo hasn't allowed us to create a true meritocracy, so we need to introduce measures to give us a nudge – because, let's face it, what gets measured gets done.

Thank you.

ENDS

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