

Unpacking the invisible knapsack

Wednesday 7 September 2022 | 1.00 - 2.00 pm BST

Over recent years, we have heard the term 'privilege' a lot, and whilst we have grappled with its meaning, we have also been encouraged to recognise our own levels of privilege. Or have we? Do you understand and acknowledge your privilege and that of those around you? In this session, we explored how to build a greater self-awareness of the various levels of privilege and how the dynamics of how power and influence can be used positively.

Unpacking the invisible knapsack

- Peggy McIntosh, an American anti-racist scholar and senior research scientist, introduced the concept of unpacking the invisible knapsack in the 1980's, following her work on understanding male privilege, and is used to describe advantages gained unwittingly from white privilege. She described white privilege as an "invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks."

Acknowledging privilege

- Our panellists shared their understanding of their own privileges, from those based on ethnicity, gender, social mobility through to language. They discussed how a deepened awareness of their privilege, acquired through workplace training and workshops, travels or the challenges of day-to-day life; enabled them to think more deeply about how such privilege influences their lives, the decisions they make and chances they take, and equally important, greater understanding about the experiences of those without such privileges.
- We all have privileges, and they are not always immediately apparent, and we need to look closely at ourselves and understand the numerous ways our [privilege may manifest](#).
- Privilege, in its various guises, can present itself as a safety net and afford those with it greater scope to be their authentic selves in the workplace - taking on greater risks and making choices that allow for their potential to be realised.

How can power and influence be used to create a positive working environment?

- Being an active ally is an important means of creating a positive working environment and fundamentally understanding that allies don't always come from the majority group. Everyone can be an ally and an active upstander, whether that is in the form of mentoring, coaching or simply standing up for those whose voices may not be heard as loudly.
- Be the bridge: for example when working with international colleagues, it is crucial to be inclusive and help them feel more comfortable and able to engage in a more meaningful way with your team.
- Using power and influence to create a positive working environment is political activism and change requires us all to move from a stance of neutrality to positive social action. Standing up for people less privileged, taking (responsibly) to social media, engaging in the discourse, and taking steps to learn more about the issues are all ways to change our world and ensure equity in opportunity.

- Social capital in the workplace is also a powerful tool that can be used to foster a positive working environment. Those in senior positions should use their social capital and platform to encourage those in leadership to engage in the conversation, meet with new people and collaborate to ensure privilege is used for the greater good.

Is there a risk to using power and influence to create a positive working environment?

- There is always a possibility that one's efforts to create a positive working environment can backfire. In such circumstances it's important to consider intention, and remember that we all make mistakes - the key is to learn from them. If your actions to redress privilege are challenged, try to understand why there is opposition and why your actions may not have been construed as intended.
- For the person who does not have a particular privilege, it's important to acknowledge intentions and extend kindness and grace to allies, especially where their intentions are good and genuine. We risk pushing allies away from engaging with the discourse if we are quick to judge and scold them for their mistakes.

Practical tips for using your power and influence to effect change

- Take steps to get to know people who are different to you so that you gain new perspectives on life and others' experiences. Doing so can help in understanding those around you and provide the gateway to many solutions.
- Have a sense of respectful curiosity, keep an open mind and seek out opportunities to build relationships, even with people you may disagree with on certain matters. When we stop talking, we halt progress.
- Feel that as an individual you have agency, no matter how small, and use this agency to influence change.

Some reading on this topic

- **'How to be an Ally' - Melinda Briana Epler** - Humanises diversity and inclusion and facilitates greater empathy and understanding between people of all identities. It teaches us that every individual can learn about the imbalance in opportunity and work to correct it.
- **'Why we Kneel, How we rise' - Michael Holding** - West Indies cricket legend of 70s/80s What it is like to be treated differently just because of the colour of your skin
- **'We can't talk about that at Work' - Mary-Frances Winters** - A guide for bold, inclusive conversations

#WeAreNotNeutral

Chaired by:



Yindi Gesinde
Partner
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Our Panel:



Nick Cranfield
Chief Legal Officer
Therme Group



Nicola Lancaster
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Mike Sealy
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