

Paying the tax - how to avoid the cement ceiling

Thursday 9 November 2023 | 1.00 - 2.00 pm GMT

During this webinar we explored the challenges faced by women of colour in workplaces, the strengths that they bring to the table, in part due to having to overcome the challenge of breaking through the 'cement ceiling', and the practical takeaways for organisations looking to address the 'double jeopardy'¹ of gender and racial disparities which women of colour can experience in the workplace.

1. The Cement Ceiling

Instead of the 'glass ceiling', which describes what women generally can experience when trying to progress in the workplace, women of colour pay a price navigating organisational spaces that were not created with them in mind and can find themselves up against the more impenetrable 'cement ceiling'. In this regard, they can often be visibly invisible: visible to others as a result of being an ethnic minority, but invisible when it comes to work opportunities and career progression. There is an emotional tax resulting from the exclusions that occur at the intersection of race and gender, which can in turn have a detrimental impact on mental health.

2. Strength in difference

Women of colour bring a unique and invaluable perspective to organisations, regularly navigating between multiple cultures, worlds, histories and expectations to help others see and understand their point of view. There are identifiable strengths that make them assets: their authenticity in trying to become comfortable in their own skin; being values-driven; continuously learning; bringing a visible dimension of presence, passion, and multiple perspectives; cultural competence; and strategy, all of which can benefit organisations when women of colour are given a seat at the table.

3. The Gender Agenda

Gender is not a unifying factor and the 'Gender Agenda' (i.e. efforts made to progress gender equality, for example via gender-focused networks) can often exclude women of colour. Research² shows that White women are perceived more positively in the workplace and benefit from the privilege that comes with being a part of the majority. There is a dissonance in understanding the impact of racism and racial bias and its multiplicity when it comes down to gender. Gender networks are receiving calls to action to reset and properly integrate women of colour. White female colleagues can partner with women of colour to become their proactive allies, as all women are stronger together.

4. Lifting up women of colour is not a zero-sum game

Lifting women of colour up is not a zero-sum game. It is not about losing something if someone else gains something. To create a fairer and better society that leaves everyone better off, we need to grow the cake together and create a rising tide that will lift everyone.

5. Confirmation and relational bias

There is a certain confirmation bias that occurs between White men and White women, which can often be unconscious as well as conscious. If White men see the ships of White women rise, they identify this with their mothers, daughters, sisters – this progress means that their families rise. Issues are often framed relationally, meaning an individual is more often able to understand issues as they relate to them or their family or lived experience and if they can be applied to their own lives. Allies can expand their approach to these issues beyond the relational to think about what kind of society they want their relations to live in.

6. Knowledge is power

The starting point is knowledge is power. Data-led research has created powerful insights into the experience of women of colour in the workplace. Allies need to equip themselves with knowledge and understanding of other people's experiences to begin to move away from their hardwired affinities (which can be unlearned, with time and effort). Organisations should be holding pay equity reviews, publishing ethnicity pay gap data (where permissible under local laws) and collecting and internally analysing their intersectional pay data.

¹ A phrase coined by the Black feminist writer, Francis M. Beal in 1969.

² [Different Women, Different Places](#)

7. FIT leadership

It is incumbent upon leadership to drive the collective values of the people in their organisation. As shared by Lisa LeCointe-Cephas, FIT leadership is needed:

F: we need to fearlessly call out discrimination and the lack of parity.

I: we need to identify, lift and invest in women of colour specifically. We need to look beyond the confirmation bias and the traditional networks and really, truly advocate for women of colour and leadership roles.

T: we need to talk about privilege and hold each other accountable. This requires understanding that privilege is not a dirty word and the only dirty thing in practice is when we let it go unspoken.

8. Seats at the table

Organisations need to have intentional allyship programs which centre women of colour and place them at the table alongside leadership and members of the majority groups. Women of colour can offer diverse perspectives, often representing not only their own identity, but other marginalized groups. Equally, the emotional tax of organisational inclusion and equity should not fall on women of colour as the marginalised group. Rather, this needs to be a collective effort with the most 'tax' paid by the majority who can afford it. When women of colour are called on to carry the mantle, heed should be paid to their workloads and schedules.

#WeAreNotNeutral

Moderated by:



Yindi Gesinde
Partner
Baker McKenzie

Our Panel:



Carol Campayne
Director
The Diversity Practice



Lisa LeCointe-Cephas
Chief Ethics and
Compliance Officer OGC
Merck



Nick Cranfield
Chief Legal Officer
Therme Group

Baker McKenzie delivers integrated solutions to complex challenges.

Complex business challenges require an integrated response across different markets, sectors and areas of law. Baker McKenzie's client solutions provide seamless advice, underpinned by deep practice and sector expertise, as well as first-rate local market knowledge. Across more than 70 offices globally, Baker McKenzie works alongside our clients to deliver solutions for a connected world.

bakermckenzie.com