

The man in the mirror...

The yearning for equal treatment has been at the heart of change in modern society. From the *Magna Carta*, to the French Revolution to the advent of democracy in South Africa, human beings desire equality as a fundamental principle of fair treatment.



But, if we all have this intrinsic need to be treated fairly and equally, why is it that we still differentiate and treat others unequally? How is it possible that some men fail to appreciate that their references to women's beauty and the "uplifting effect" this may have on a workplace objectifies and demeans women? Why do students need to protest to highlight the plight of rape victims at universities? What lessons are there to be learnt in order to ensure an enabling workplace that allows all people to grow and prosper?

Progressive legislation

A key requirement for changing discriminatory practices, habits or patterns is to prohibit certain conduct. South Africa has some of the most progressive employment legislation in the world. Our Constitution guarantees rights to equality and fair labour practices. The Employment Equity Act (55 of 1998) prohibits unfair discrimination against employees. The Act also provides for damages and compensation to be awarded to victims of discrimination or other breaches of the Act. Our employment tribunal, the CCMA, and specialist labour court provide a great dispute resolution system to address complaints of harassment, discrimination or victimisation. Yet, if newspaper reports are anything to go by, discrimination in the workplace is still rife, and shows no signs of waning. It would appear therefore that, on its own, the implementation of legislation will not change attitudes.

Challenging behaviour

Employees are often reluctant to raise issues of victimisation, discrimination or sexual harassment. A recent study in the United States disturbingly indicates that only 1,9% of employees who reported workplace bullying to the human resources department of the organisation were satisfied that a fair and just resolution was eventually reached. Thirty-one percent of participants in the survey indicated that HR took no action, with a whopping (and disturbing) 37% stated that the HR actions actually resulted in retaliation against them. Consequently, employees are reluctant to speak up or confront wrongdoers as they believe that they will not get fair treatment.

Has the time not come for all stakeholders in the modern workplace to say that we will end bigotry at work in our lifetime? If legislation and employment policies do not bring about a change in the behaviour of chauvinists, racists, homophobes or your common, garden variety bigot, can we not take positive steps to show that such behaviour is not acceptable when we are around?

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What to do

Executives, managers, supervisors, other employees, service providers, clients - all stakeholders in the employment relationship - should adopt the *Man in the Mirror* attitude when it comes to effecting changes in workplace behaviour. Like Michael Jackson so poignantly stated in that classic song, *if you want to make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and make the change*.

We should firstly ask ourselves how our own behaviour contributes to a society where it seems acceptable to treat people differently based on their gender, race, religion, sexual orientation or other arbitrary characteristics. Secondly, we should take to task those in our company who feel it appropriate to discriminate. As a man, I should say to another man that it is not okay to make jokes at the expense of women. As a father, I should say to colleagues that it is unfair to treat staff differently who cannot stay late because they have to go home to feed their kids. As a Caucasian, I must take issue with colleagues or clients who disrespect someone in my team based on the colour of his/her skin.

We should become more sensitised not only to the direct discrimination that is still endemic but also to those subtle manners of differentiation that are not clearly founded in discrimination, but allow people to be treated differently based on arbitrary grounds. It is not okay ask a young female employee whether she intends to have a family - would you ask the same of her male counterpart? It is not funny when the chief executive highlights the uplifting effect that a beautiful woman has on the workplace - would you still think it humorous if that was your daughter who has had all her wonderful qualities reduced to her physical appearance and the way she makes others feel when they look at her?

Eradicating workplace discrimination is not the role of the human resources department. Every one of us has a duty to future generations to take discrimination seriously and make it un-cool in the workplace. Discrimination does not only degrade those who are the direct victims of discrimination, it demeans all of us.

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