

# The Space Between

## From Rhetoric to Reality on Race Equality in the Workplace

**SANDRA SANGLIN-GRANT**

From 2000 to the present, Runnymede has been registering a persistent gap in perception between those making policy pronouncements on equality and diversity in the workplace and those receiving the messages as employees. This gap is the factor by which rhetoric from strategic policymakers fails to reflect or predict the experience of minority ethnic managers as they progress their careers within the management hierarchies of national businesses and organisations.

Our *Moving on Up?* report in 2000 had shown the disproportion between strength of minority ethnic intake and their numerical shortfall in terms of progress to management success among some FTSE-100 companies. Companies, however, were then and now talking up the strength of their equality and diversity practices. Why is the rhetoric still so different from the experiences?

We've kept going back to examine the nature of this gap, to try and work out how it could be eradicated. In this report we concentrate on how the language of Human Resources is managing to give a false impression of success – to the HR personnel themselves in particular – while minority ethnic managers remain unengaged and unpromoted. What emerges is a more purposeful modelling of HR language directed towards more truly inclusive outcomes.

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**SANDRA SANGLIN-GRANT** is Director of Inspire Futures Ltd, a consultancy whose mission is to unlock potential and create transformational leaders through leadership and diversity coaching and training. Sandra can be contacted at [mail@inspirefutures.com](mailto:mail@inspirefutures.com)

# I. Introduction

Do public relations pronouncements measure up to the everyday experience of equality and diversity at work? Has any improvement been noted in the performance of policymakers and policy implementers on meeting specific equality and diversity objectives within their work environments? Is there a growing perception, among minority ethnic employees in particular, that there is equality of treatment in the workplace? This briefing paper expresses our findings in respect of policymakers and employees, both white and minority ethnic, within the day-to-day context of their respective organisations.

In order to address these questions what we have done is to:

1. Pick up from where our *Moving on Up?* report left off – in particular, to take a further look at its findings where it identifies a wide mismatch in perceptions on race equality between strategic policymakers on equality and diversity and minority ethnic employees
2. Identify obstacles to developing and implementing race equality objectives
3. Develop recommendations for closing the gulf between real employee experience and company policy on equality and diversity

Primarily aimed at HR practitioners, this briefing paper also speaks to everyone involved in the policymaking process on equal opportunities and diversity, and race equality in particular:

*Moving on Up?* provided some measures of how well FTSE-100 companies were performing in the area of race equality.<sup>1</sup> It showed that, barring a tiny handful, most were not performing at all well in terms of recruitment, progression and retention of minority ethnic employees. If an indicator of success is the number of minority ethnic employees who have filtered through into senior management positions, proportionate to their numbers in the workforce, then the findings showed that there was an approximate 99% shortfall. Further research since *Moving on Up?* has shown similar findings, across all sectors.<sup>2</sup>

We wanted to examine whether there was a correlation between under-representation of minority ethnic staff and mismatching perceptions. The following chart from the *Moving on Up?* report displays a high degree of satisfaction from policymakers in terms of their equality and diversity practices.

Statement	Agree %
• Promotions in our organisation are entirely based on merit	97
• Minority ethnic staff are readily accepted and respected in our organisation	95
• The policies and procedures we have for recruitment do not discriminate against minority ethnic groups	92
• There is a real commitment from the top to improve the company's performance on race equality issues	75

<sup>1</sup> Sandra Sanglin-Grant and Robin Schneider, *Moving on Up? Racial Equality and the Corporate Agenda – A Study of FTSE 100 Companies*; Schneider-Ross for the Runnymede Trust, February 2000

<sup>2</sup> See 'Black Voices at Work', Trades Union Congress, April 2003; RFO Survey of FTSE-100 Companies; 'Harnessing Workforce Diversity to Raise the Bottom Line', Amin Rajan; 'Are "snowy peaks" the new glass ceiling? Career Progression in the Private Sector', Trevor Phillips's speech to the Policy Studies Institute, 9 February 2003; *Guardians of Race Equality: Perspectives on Inspection and Regulation*, London: the Runnymede Trust, 2003

The question we asked ourselves, therefore, was: who is it inside organisations that usually fills in questionnaires like this one? The answer is Human Resources (HR) representatives. In some organisations it is also true that line managers get involved in activities of this kind, but by and large HR is where company data is stored and measurements about people issues are carried out.

We felt that therein lay some important clues about what was happening in the space between policymaking and real experience.

The original *Moving on Up?* research pointed out that:

***What is particularly startling, given the few organisations that actually take any steps to get feedback from their minority ethnic employees, is the certainty of the responses to these statements.***

***Clearly this certainty is not shared by minority ethnic professionals and managers involved in this research. Given that these are people who were volunteered by their companies and are conspicuously succeeding in their careers, these feelings are likely to be even stronger amongst minority ethnic employees as a whole***

In this paper we look at this certainty from policymakers in more depth and try to provide clues to the reasons underpinning it. We examine the impact of obstacles to achieving race equality. And we suggest what might be done differently to bridge 'the space between' policy and practice.

### Summary of findings from *Moving on Up?*

*Moving on Up? Racial Equality and the Corporate Agenda: A Study of FTSE 100 Companies*, published by the Runnymede Trust in February 2000, aimed to gather data on the true numbers of minority ethnic staff working for FTSE-100 companies in the UK, as well as identifying best-practice equal opportunities and diversity policies. It also reported information from minority ethnic managerial and professional staff about the barriers they continue to face in terms of progression through their organisations.

The data provided by the 55 companies that responded showed that only a small percentage of companies monitored their staff populations by ethnicity. It showed too that there was still an incredibly small percentage of minority ethnic senior managers, less than 1.0%.

From the focus groups conducted with minority ethnic professionals and managers there was a strong feeling of exclusion by means of subtle, non-overt discrimination.

Finally, of most interest for the purposes of this report, was the complacency shown by HR professionals, who seemed to think that the policies and procedures they had in place to combat racial discrimination were effective, despite the fact that low minority ethnic representation at senior levels and minority ethnic disaffection in general indicated that their policies were not working.

## 2. An In-depth Look at Organisations

Three large, well-known organisations let us gather data directly from their employees:

- a high-street financial services company
- a public-sector organisation
- an accountancy firm.

In addition to the experience of the three participating companies and evidence from *Moving on Up?*, two other pieces of Runnymede research have fed into this final document:

1. *Widening the Talent Pool*,<sup>3</sup> published 2 years after *Moving on Up?*, set out to determine whether the original participating FTSE-100 companies had acted upon its recommendations.
2. *Divided by the Same Language*,<sup>4</sup> a year further on, reviewed the effectiveness of the language of equal opportunities and diversity and how to develop a convincing communications strategy.

Brief summaries of the findings from the 2000 and 2002 publications are given below to enlarge the context for what we have to say here.

We consider the findings from the three organisations that participated in this latest research to have provided us with some real riches and insights, which we are setting out to convey here. This is only the beginning of the journey, however, and as a result of this work, there would be great merit in developing a number of forums where these issues could be explored and debated further.

<sup>3</sup> 'Widening the Talent Pool: Racial Equality in FTSE-100 Companies', was researched for a BT Conference of the same name, July 2002, and published as a Runnymede Trust Briefing Paper in 2002.

<sup>4</sup> 'Divided by the Same Language: Equal Opportunities and Diversity Translated', Runnymede Trust Briefing Paper by Sandra Sanglin-Grant, March 2003.

### Summary of findings from *Widening the Talent Pool*

One year after the publication of *Moving on Up?* Runnymede took a temperature reading to gauge what progress FTSE-100 companies had made in widening the pool from which they selected their employees, particularly their minority ethnic staff.

Of the companies that responded to the survey, there continued to be only a small minority that were actively moving race equality up the corporate agenda – the same ones as before. The majority seemed to have made a few adjustments, but otherwise were more or less where they had been a year ago. The rest had let race equality slip off the agenda altogether. One new entrant to the FTSE was just starting to think about the issue, while another new entrant did not consider they had a problem.



### 3. The Research Methodology

A series of diagnostic sessions, held in each of the three participating organisations over three days, involved separate groups:

- staff from HR
- minority ethnic managers
- white managers

We called them diagnostic sessions instead of traditional 'focus groups' because we not only gathered information, but also involved participants in creative problem-solving around developing solutions they had identified as problematic.

Another approach was to use narratives, otherwise known as 'strategic storytelling', to help participants create a safe space in which to discuss sensitive issues. One of the many proponents of the use of narratives is Stephen Denning,<sup>5</sup> who used them as a transformational tool with the World Bank to introduce a significant change programme. Denning's thesis is that stories go to a different area of the psyche, eliciting positive, possibility thinking rather than the kind of thinking more prone to raising objections and obstacles. IBM's Cynefin Centre too has developed a database of thousands of narratives from around the world for use in the process of organisational development and strategic thinking.

Reactions to the narratives we used in the diagnostic sessions were extremely positive, quickly breaking down barriers and inhibitions and allowing free-flowing discussion. Participants said that the narratives provided a level of safety, allowing them to break out of the mould, and that they were good thought-provokers.

In advance of the sessions we had spent time with HR, to understand more about the organisation, as well as review their company demographics and equality and diversity policies. The participating companies were very receptive and open to sharing information with us. As we had found when preparing *Moving on Up?*, however, the monitoring data on employee representation continues to be patchy and difficult to access.

Although initially conducted as split sessions, the last diagnostic session brought minority ethnic and white managers together for the creative problem-solving process. For all the organisations, this was the first time that staff had ever come together in this way to discuss these issues, and such was the enthusiasm for working together, that groups wanted to continue to meet afterwards. The HR groups remained separate throughout. (It was particularly striking though that the HR representatives were thinking about these issues in this way for the first time.) In one organisation the diagnostic sessions were supplemented by a series of one-to-one telephone interviews with minority ethnic and white senior managers.

When we sought feedback from participants on the whole diagnostic process, the reaction was overwhelmingly positive. They particularly liked the fact that we had run the two groups of white and black managers separately and then brought them together. They also appreciated the opportunity to use the problem-solving model rather than simply focus on uncovering the problems. They appreciated too the external facilitation and the different styles of the facilitators (the minority ethnic facilitator worked with the minority ethnic managers and the white facilitator with the white managers; and both facilitators worked together for the mixed session and the session with HR). It was very striking for us as facilitators to see how the mixed session opened up such cooperative dynamics around the table.

Each member of the management team belongs to a racially diverse 'learning circle', composed of three or four people who have been charged with studying and exploring issues of difference in the workplace. Periodically, the circle meets to discuss what they've learned and how it might apply to them and the company. It's just a beginning, but at least they've begun to uncover some difficult issues, and that's the first step in tackling them.

DWB extract\*

One participating organisation has already given us feedback that as a result of our work with them they have set up a diversity network, which is fully inclusive and has the ear of senior management.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Denning, *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations*, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2000

\* In 2002 *Harvard Business Review* published an article by Caver and Livers called 'Dear White Boss', in which the device of a fictional letter from a black manager to a white boss allows the authors to express what it is about their experience of corporate life that undermines the confidence of minority ethnic employees, at all levels within companies, and inhibits the formation of the kind of everyday trust in each other without which everyone's working life is impoverished. We were struck by how this fictional narrative mirrored the responses we had obtained from the participants in our own survey. At various points in this paper, therefore, we quote from 'Dear White Boss' to emphasise that there has been an emotional impact on the respondents which goes deeper than the words in which they express their observations. The article is reprinted in full at the end of this Briefing Paper, and we thank HBR for their permission in allowing us to reproduce this material, which originally appeared in its December 2002 issue, pp. 76–81 and is copyright © 2002 Harvard Business Review, distributed by NYT Syndicate.

## 4. The Policymaking Process

You've been a good boss. I've learned a lot from you, and I've gotten my promotions and raises. And that's the devil of it. Everything looks fine, but it isn't.

*DWB extract*

Successful organisations spend time and energy on developing their equality and diversity strategies for change, taking them beyond simple compliance with the law. They seek to embrace and harness equality and diversity and have recognised their benefits for the organisation and the individual.

If one of their stated outcomes, however, is to have a fair representation of the wide spectrum of employees at senior management levels, as an indicator of success, then clearly the process that companies are following to develop their strategies needs to be examined more closely. Even organisations with highly developed strategies on equality and diversity attest to the fact that they are finding it difficult to progress minority ethnic staff into senior positions.

The elements listed here are considered essential in developing a strategic framework for diversity and for race equality. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that none of this really works unless accompanied by an attitude or 'mindset' that includes a certain openness to diversity and difference – in other words a more qualitative, and therefore less quantifiable, human factor:

### The strategic framework for race equality and diversity<sup>6</sup>

- Written policies and procedures
- Training to implement policies
- Leadership from the top
- High-level Champion
- Data on employee representation and satisfaction
- A business case
- Improved targets on recruitment, retention and promotion
- Line manager involvement
- Integration into all areas of organisational life
- A good communications strategy
- External involvement
- A strong link to corporate social responsibility
- Resourcing

Our diagnostic sessions research showed that some HR professionals (but not all) showed an awareness of how the strategic framework ought to work to maximum effect.

*'We review our strategy in-house and involve managers from the start of the process. We also get input from business and HR.'*

<sup>6</sup> This framework is developed from an earlier model that originated in the *Moving On Up?* report (Runnymede 2000). The recent Audit Commission self-assessment tool also reflects this process: 'The Journey to Race Equality' (AC 2004)

Not only that, but some could also see the need to set clear measures for each area to ensure that they were keeping on track and consulting with target groups.

*'We have Key Performance Indicators (or metrics)'*

*'Minority groups are consulted'*

### 4.1 Difficulties faced by HR Managers

Despite well-developed guidelines on how to develop and implement a strategic framework, HR professionals were very vocal about constraints they faced in making it work effectively. From our diagnostic sessions, they identified several inhibitors to success.

#### 4.1.1 Lack of clarity of HR role

They felt inhibited in performing their duties effectively, for example, through lack of clarity about their role.

*'HR's role is at times not very clear - is it policy or practice?'*

#### 4.1.2 Messages and momentum

Sometimes too HR representatives felt they were not too clear about the messages they were putting out, or how to keep momentum going once changes were announced.

*'There's a lack of clarity about the message - the message does not always match reality'*

*'When you announce a change and then have to go back and add on a bit – you're told you don't know what you're doing'*

There was recognition too of the difference between disseminating messages and influencing change – that the one does not presuppose the other:

*'There is the constant challenge of getting the message out and keeping it out, keeping it on the agenda'*

*'There isn't recognition that discrimination still exists - just because you put the message out doesn't mean the problem is being solved'*

#### 4.1.3 Criticism of leadership

... on top of his ordinary work he was going to have to expend significant energy managing his white colleagues' perceptions if he or his two new managers were to have a chance of succeeding.

*DWB extract*

For HR representatives, one of the challenges associated with getting the message out and achieving consistency of outcomes was concern about senior management's leadership of the strategic process and its tendency to downplay or 'massage' the messages.



*'The leadership is not always consistent, and while there may well be reasons for the lack of consistency, they are not always communicated throughout the organisation'*

*'One of the main obstacles to the role of HR is how "senior management fly in the face of what you're doing"'*

*'There is a sense that we're feeding good news and playing down potential issues'*

When Board composition and those at the top of the organisations interviewed are so lacking in representation from minority ethnic groups, positive messages are not reinforced.

#### 4.1.4 Intention/Implementation divide

HR representatives considered that there was a gap between the intention of the strategic framework or policy, and its implementation.

*'We don't have evidence that attempts to mainstream equal opportunities and diversity are working, and now we don't have a team out there raising awareness, we don't know what is happening, and different parts of the business are doing their own thing'*

*'Equal opportunities training has fallen by the wayside so awareness is slipping – if we have good policies, how are we getting them across if we don't have training?'*

*'Practice is where we let ourselves down – target groups would feel that the policies are all well and good, but does my manager know about these?'*

*'It is likely that we have colleagues who feel discriminated against'*

*'Some managers do put equality and diversity in the drawer'*

*'There's a diluted process up and down the line in implementing policy'*

Nor was there much satisfaction with the results of the measures used to test implementation.

*'The surveys to check satisfaction and success of policy don't always tell the full story'*

*'HR are satisfied with progress, but coal face are not'*

*'The HR team have done a fantastic job of getting equality and diversity on the agenda, although it's not clear how it impacts on individuals'*

*'There is a mismatch in perceptions between "minority" groups and the strategic policymakers because of a lack of consistency of messages – we can't assume that once a policy is out there, the practice will automatically follow'*

## 4.2 Thoughts on Policymaking from Minority Ethnic Managers

We asked minority ethnic managers what they thought about the policymaking and implementation processes.

### 4.2.1 Lack of leadership

Minority ethnic managers shared the view with HR that the policymaking process was hampered by a lack of top-level leadership.

*'A senior manager decided to look at equal opportunities and invited ethnic minorities to participate. The action points were watered down and didn't get implemented. A year later we received documents on equality and diversity that said that inequalities would not be tolerated'*

*'The higher up equality and diversity goes, it is not given the priority it deserves – there's no will to change'*

*'£50,000 was spent on an external consultant to review equality and diversity. Senior managers went to the presentation along with the "chosen" ethnic minorities, but there was no publicity about the recommendations or what happened next. It was a box-ticking exercise'*

*'There's no real conviction or leadership – there's a lack of will'*

### 4.2.2 Lack of measurement

Similarly, measurement of the impact of policies was seen by minority ethnic managers as being less than satisfactory.

*'Questionnaires only require a 'yes' or 'no' answer with little room for specific comments'*

*'Often policies are not seen through to completion or measurement'*

### 4.2.3 Slow change and cover-up

The change process itself was seen as being cumbersome and slow.

*'It's often a long, drawn-out process to get change implemented'*

Minority ethnic managers felt that there was some cover-up of issues rather than transparency.

*'Issues are often "whitewashed" and the true picture not presented'*

They commented too on the quality of the policies and the difficulty in communication, which might also explain why some line managers tended to put them away in a drawer, as described by HR representatives earlier:

*'Some policies are written so that they are difficult to understand'*

### 4.3 Thoughts on Policymaking from White Managers

White managers had a number of perceptions about what creates the divide between policy and practice, including the tendency to conform to a good news culture, lack of consultation and having to manage competing priorities.

#### 4.3.1 Good news culture

White managers highlighted the tendency of their senior management teams to push bad news under the carpet.

*'Top level managers tend to dismiss negative findings and middle managers tend to politicise or make more palatable the findings to suit themselves'*

They attributed this shying away from difficult messages to a fear factor among those jockeying for position. They themselves felt they would be inhibited in their career prospects if they were to discuss difficulties openly.

*'Reporting negative findings would affect promotion/progression'*

*'The nearer the top the more diluted the message given – there's a need to please one's bosses, to make the message more palatable'*

*'There is a tendency on the part of the policy designers to be selective of data used'*

I'd say that some of us are reluctant to take risks we probably should take, because we don't think you'll support us if we make a mistake.

DWB extract

#### 4.3.2 Lack of consultation

White managers felt there were some deficiencies in the process of policy development, in terms of the failure to consult, which they considered produced unworkable policies.

*'There is a lack of consultation with those responsible for implementation so the policy created is often unrealistic or impractical, and managers often lack the skills, resources and communication to implement it'*

*'There is a lack of external consultation and input on diversity issues – a recent survey showed increased satisfaction with service among ethnic minority businesses, but without asking them why'*

#### 4.3.3 Competing priorities

There was recognition from white managers that lack of time and lots of different demands on their attention played a large part in ensuring that equality and diversity went to the bottom of the pile.

*'Initiatives are overtaken by others or stay in people's desk drawers'*

*'On equality issues, higher priority items take over – where there are competing actions or time, equalities loses out'*

*'There is much initiative fatigue, especially at the front line'*

#### 4.3.4 Lack of a communication strategy

Poor communication strategies were seen by white managers as contributing to the lack of take-up of policies.

*'Communication tools are needed to avoid initiatives being binned but they don't know how to do this for long-term success'*

*'There is a need for strong communication to raise awareness'*

#### 4.3.5 Confusion around who develops policies

White managers felt that there was too much distance between policymakers and the grassroots.

*'The designer of the policy is too removed from the reality on the ground'*

### 4.4 Agreement about Who Develops and Who Implements Policy

There seemed to be a general consensus that equal opportunities policies were implemented at the grassroots as a bottom-up process, while the strategy is set top-down by the Board.

*'Implementation comes from the bottom up; so at grassroots level, it is understood that equal opportunities tools exist for its implementation'*

*'Policy and strategy come from the Board'*

## 5. Effectiveness of the Strategic Framework

With the key elements of a strategic framework for equality and diversity, as tabulated in Section 3, for our context, we were keen to know what our different cohorts thought about the results that this strategic framework produced for race equality.

### 5.1 Views from HR — Some Successes

One of the areas we have examined is the perceived mismatch between HR and minority ethnic managers'



perceptions of progress on race equality, the former being more positive than the latter. Here too we hear some of that optimism from HR repeated.

#### 5.1.1 Positive changes in organisational culture

There was a conviction that colour did not matter when it came to recognising talent. HR representatives also felt that some types of behaviour had changed for the better:

*‘If people have the ability they will be recognised, regardless of race or colour’*

*‘There’s more heightened awareness of these issues’*

*‘You won’t hear the racist jokes you would have heard 10–15 years ago’*

*‘There’s increased cultural awareness’*

*‘People booking holidays value each others’ cultures’*

*‘There are very few race-related tribunals’*

#### 5.1.2 More visible diversity

There was a perception too of more diversity in the workforce with a wider range of ethnicities and cultures.

*‘The make-up of the workforce has shown a rapid change in the numbers of ethnic minorities who work for us’*

*‘All areas are widening the candidate pool’*

*‘We’re seeing more diverse images’*

*‘There’s more racial equality’*

*‘We have better customer service because employees can speak a variety of languages’*

#### 5.1.3 HR views of the challenges

This is the area where we really started to uncover some of the reservations expressed by HR representatives about the impact of the strategic framework on working life.

*‘It’s harder for a black person to break through’*

#### 5.1.4 Lack of progression of minority ethnic staff

There was much mention of what minority ethnic staff themselves needed to do more of to get on and a certain puzzlement about why they were not progressing as well as they might.

*‘There is a lack of ethnic minorities in management’*

*‘We’re struggling to convert applications from ethnic minorities into appointments and we can’t see a pattern as to why that is – they get to interview stage, but there’s always a better candidate’*

*‘Some ethnic minorities have an inability to make themselves come across well at interview or to make themselves understood’*

*‘Why aren’t there more applications from ethnic minorities?’*

*‘Accents are a problem’*

#### 5.1.5 Cultural inhibitors to progression

HR representatives believed that there were a number of cultural barriers to overcome that affected the promotion chances of minority ethnic employees.

*‘There was a female ethnic minority colleague who had to turn down a promotion because of her parents’*

*‘Some go to India and don’t come back’*

*‘Some whites don’t want to work with that person because of their religion or cultural background; we need education on religious and cultural diversity’*

*‘Some take time off for Eid - they’re taking advantage of the fact English people don’t know about religious practices’*

*‘Non-ethnics wonder what they’re missing out on’*

*‘When they took the job they knew what was expected of them’*

#### 5.1.6 Organisational culture

HR representatives felt that there were a number of factors involved in being a black or Asian manager related to the culture of the organisation.

*‘Conformity to the culture – will they fit?’*

*‘Although you need the same skills for everyone, unfortunately, there is a process of human intervention, for example, white recruiters and tests – people identify with their own kind’*

*‘They need a sponsor to get through to senior management positions’*

*‘They have to be talking the talk of senior management they hope to join and play the game’*

*‘There is still racism – I heard “nigger in the woodpile”’*

*‘Why has British culture had to change to incorporate non-whites?’*

*‘We haven’t got a diverse talent pool to start from’*

*‘Some ethnic minorities have all conformed’*

Despite my 15 years of experience, despite my solid track record, my new colleagues appeared to have little interest in my business expertise. Instead they seemed to have assigned me some special role: official interpreter of minority concerns for the organization.

DWB extract

### 5.1.7 Success factors for white managers

HR representatives thought that there were a number of success factors in being a white manager – some of which were similar to being a black or Asian manager; but with fewer obstacles to overcome.

*‘It takes the same amount of conformity as for Black and Asians, but there are less obvious things to change’*

*‘It’s easier for them because the people judging them are of the same kind’*

*‘There’s nothing to prove’*

## 5.2 Views from Minority Ethnic Managers

### 5.2.1 Positive bridges between policy and practice

Minority ethnic managers acknowledged that there had been some successes in bridging the gap between policy and practice. Some of the successes related to concrete programmes such as training, as well as the visible evidence of increased numbers of minority ethnic staff at lower levels.

*‘The positive action training for ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and women are successes’*

*‘There is some good management around’*

*‘The networking groups for ethnic minorities and women are helpful’*

*‘There is recognition within the organisation that diversity exists’*

*‘The equality and diversity training and induction courses are useful’*

*‘There is more acceptance of diversity and differences and one participant cited examples of the ease with which he exchanged jokes about being a “black man” with white colleagues’*

*‘Muslims are allowed to leave early if they are fasting’*

*‘Race does not come up as an issue on a day-to-day basis’*

*‘I feel that I got my job on merit and was promoted within a year, and not because I’m a woman or black’*

*‘I was promoted fast on merit and there is huge camaraderie within [t]his department – we go shopping together’*

*‘There is more diversity at recruitment’*

*‘Ethnic minorities are moving into middle and lower management’*

### 5.2.2 Challenges in bridging the policy–practice gap

The overwhelming feeling from minority ethnic interviewees, however, was that there were still a lot of problems to be tackled, starkly illustrating the space between policy and practice. Many of the challenges are related to perceptions of unfair treatment and exclusion, as well as cultural issues such as the impact of after-work drinking.

### 5.2.3 Racism still endemic

Some minority ethnic participants felt very strongly that there was still a great deal of covert racism around. There also seemed to be a correlation between age and length of service, so that longer-serving individuals were more likely to feel dissatisfied.

*‘I feel overwhelmed by the number of challenges there are on equality and diversity – the difficulties are endless – racism is still endemic, although it has become indirect and covert’*

*‘There are some excellent white colleagues, but there are also a number of minority ethnic colleagues who have been on the receiving end of racism and inappropriate behaviour’*

*‘One colleague was ambitious and had the potential to be progressed quickly. She was brought in to work on a project, while also concentrating on her studies. Her white colleagues were not welcoming so she used her connections and got out very quickly’*

I believe you are in some ways blind to what is happening outside your office door.

DWB extract

### 5.2.4 Criticism of the equality and diversity team and the grievance system

The equality and diversity team itself was perceived as lacking any authority and being unrepresentative, and minority ethnic staff were concerned about the quality of the grievance systems in place to ensure fairness.

*‘We have an equality and diversity team that is powerless’*

*‘There is a lack of ethnic minority representation in the composition of the equality and diversity team and there is a lack of role models at senior levels’*



*'Training for sift and interview panellists and grievance panels has been stopped, with few ethnic minorities participating in them, making them less balanced or independent'*

### 5.2.5 Does your face fit?

It was clear from interviews in all three organisations that minority ethnic managers perceived that attitudes towards them varied from one part of the organisation to another, meaning from one manager to another, with some managers having a much more proactive and positive attitude towards managing diversity than others.

*'In some offices the majority of people are white and in a lot of cases if your face fits you get on'*

*'I decided not to take up a promotion because of the bad reputation of the office I would have been joining'*

*'There are lower expectations of ethnic minorities – more managers have a fear of ethnic minorities not being able to perform as managers as well as people from the majority group'*

*'Ethnic minorities see the way ahead blocked and therefore switch off to possibilities and lose motivation'*

*'I've seen people come in, act inappropriately and three months later they are managers – if your face fits you'll get it'*

*'My manager never gave me any support to bring me up to the management position – she told me I was not management material – I'm planning on leaving'*

*'You have to be one of the boys'*

*'No one pushes ethnic minorities for promotion'*

He replied that he was afraid to hire black leaders because, he said, 'If I fire them, they will sue me'. ... I think stereotypes based on fear that have festered into 'fact' are what's behind this behaviour.

DWB extract

*'Black men are perceived as aggressive and troublemakers – they don't perceive that there are opportunities to progress so they leave'*

*'Ethnic minorities need to justify their positions and qualifications'*

*'Why do I have to be on the defensive all the time? Why can't I just be myself?'*

*'Asian managers are put off by behaviours at the top'*

... you seem to hold me accountable for explaining the actions of other black people as if I had some personal knowledge or culpability. It makes me feel like you don't see me for who I am; it makes me feel alienated from you, from this company.

DWB extract

### 5.2.6 Lack of management enthusiasm for positive action

The perception from minority ethnic managers was that positive action courses and initiatives were somehow undervalued by managers and that the employee network had no authority.

*'I detect a negative attitude towards positive action courses – ethnic minority staff have trouble getting time off to go to them – they say you can have time off, but they don't let you go in reality'*

*'Some line managers don't know that the positive action courses exist'*

*'The Staff Network has no power'*

### 5.2.7 The drinking culture

Strong views were expressed by minority ethnic managers about the drinking culture and how it impacts negatively on their ability to socialise, to keep up with important developments in their departments and, in some perceptions, even to get promoted.

*'There is a tendency to focus on drinking as a social activity – because of my religion I don't drink – we have a more family-oriented way of life'*

*'Socialising, teambuilding and celebrating successes centre on getting drunk as part of British culture – it's difficult to participate'*

*'Teambuilding means getting hammered, sleeping on your manager's floor and then going off to see clients the next day – this will affect a higher proportion of Asians because of their family orientation'*

*'In my old department I was constantly harangued to take up drinking – in that smaller department there was more bullying'*

*'I don't like the drinking sessions – the swearing, the whole banter thing'*

*'I was told that I could get away with not participating for a couple of times, but then I started to get feedback that I didn't socialise'*

*'In the two to three hours of drinking things will have been informally decided'*

### 5.2.8 The 'Oops factor' around race

The perception is that race remains a taboo subject for white colleagues, particularly where a minority ethnic colleague might be part of the conversation.

*'White colleagues are reticent in talking about race or culture because of legislation'*

*'There's a worry about even mentioning the words "black or white" – there's an "Oops factor" which symbolises awkwardness in discussing these issues'*

*'Someone referred to the "black" security guard and then said "oops" because they realised I was listening'*

### 5.2.9 Extra attributes required of minority ethnic managers

Minority ethnic managers felt that, to be able to be managers, they needed more of certain attributes than their white counterparts. They mentioned things like: confidence, attitudes of others, and having to constantly prove themselves.

*'You need more drive, determination and confidence in your own abilities to be a black or Asian manager'*

*'You have to put up with backhanded comments such as that you're being promoted through favouritism or for the stats'*

*'People believe you haven't got there because of ability'*

*'You have to be that little bit better than white colleagues'*

*'You over-compensate – you tell everyone you're competent by having the technical skill to be seen to deliver – you do more to prove you have technical ability to make sure you can't be faulted on it'*

Research suggests that you're more likely to put me into an assistant director's position, even though I'm fully qualified for the director's role. ... Give me credit for the ability to make good, rational business decisions. And draw your conclusions about my abilities based on my track record, not on the color of my skin.

DWB extract

### 5.2.10 Negative customer attitudes

Dealing with customers can prove more challenging for minority ethnic staff than for white staff, sometimes encountering similar negative attitudes outside their organisation, as well as within.

*'I sit on many Board meetings with clients – it takes confidence – I'm the only black person – you have to feel you can hold your own'*

*'I attended a meeting with an external client, I arrived early – he didn't respond to a word I said until my boss got there – it knocks your confidence, so you have to have resilience and endurance'*

This feeling that we need to guard ourselves, and the extra work that it takes to discern our true friends, creates significant additional stress for us.

DWB extract

### 5.2.11 Perception of fewer hurdles for white managers

We also wanted to know whether minority ethnic participants had developed an awareness of what it took to be a white manager. Clearly they thought that white managers had an easier ride just by virtue of being white. There was an acknowledgement too, conversely, that there might be a tendency to stereotype white managers.

*'White managers were naturally more confident with easier integration into the culture – they don't have to try to fit in'*

*'They don't feel hostility immediately they walk in'*

*'We shouldn't presume that all white managers want to go down the pub'*

## 5.3 Views from White Managers

### 5.3.1 Success of existing policies

White managers felt there were a number of successes, some of which related to having the policies in place and a conviction that there is no overt racism.

*'Our equal opportunities systems and policies are extremely good'*

*'Everyone knows the policies'*

*'The appraisal system is a success – everyone has access to appraisers and mentors'*

*'This is a professional organisation where discrimination or overt racism is not practised and would not be tolerated if it were – if it happened it would be behind closed doors – and if that were the case, the strong sense of values here would mean it would not be tolerated by one's managers or peers'*

### 5.3.2 Structural challenges to race equality

White managers we interviewed identified a number of challenges in bridging the gap between policy and practice. Some demonstrated awareness that minority ethnic staff might be having a different experience from their own and that difficulties might exist in challenging the status quo. There was a perception too from some white managers that 'difference' would work against prospects of progressing further up the organisation.



*'There is an issue of proving discrimination in this organisation – it's hard to do'*

*'Complaints are the only method of tackling discrimination as managers do not take proactive action'*

*'The size and structure of the office also makes a difference as to whether an individual will challenge actual or perceived discrimination'*

*'The current independent business structure impedes the ability of the organisation to address equality and diversity issues across the businesses, as well as fostering isolation and reinforcing stereotypes'*

*'There's a lack of consistent monitoring, and where data does exist, it is not shared across the businesses or the different managerial levels'*

*'The focus on facts and figures means that there is little investigation of how people are feeling and what they are thinking'*

*'Even at entry level there are few ethnic minorities, so if there were more at entry level there would be no reason why more didn't progress through the organisation'*

Difference itself is not a bad thing. Research shows that heterogeneous groups make better decisions than do homogeneous ones. Diverse groups also tend to have better problem-solving skills, are more creative, and deal more effectively with complex challenges. ... But because so many organisations manage difference poorly, they may not be reaping the benefits diversity can bring. I don't want us to continue making that mistake.

DWB extract

### 5.3.3 Covert racism

There was acknowledgement from white managers that something was not working in terms of the progression of minority ethnic staff, but also that because so many of the unhelpful attitudes were covert, it would be difficult to deal with any problems that arose possibly because of lack of experience in dealing with issues of that nature.

*'Why are blacks, Asians and women staff in lower grades?'*

*'There is stereotyping of individuals which can have a negative impact on their careers'*

*'There's a tendency to turn a blind eye to problems and issues, for example, discrimination, so we're*

*turning away from those in need or those experiencing something different'*

*'Where racism did happen, it would be handled badly because there is no experience of dealing with it as an issue'*

*'People behave professionally within the organisation, but what they think about race is unknown – no one would be openly racist so no one would know if someone were racist and their undeclared views may affect their appraisal of others'*

### 5.3.4 Fitting in

White managers echoed the feeling from their minority ethnic colleagues that there was a certain organisational proforma, one that needed to be conformed to in order to progress; in other words, the need to fit in is very strong.

*'Getting on means conforming to a particular organisational style – moving from proving technical competencies to people skills'*

*'If one came from a different background and exhibited a different style, then that could be prohibitive to progression'*

*'If you come from a culture where people don't address people in the expected manner, then there will be an issue'*

### 5.3.5 How good does a non-white manager have to be?

White managers were asked to imagine what it might take to be a black or Asian manager. Again the theme of 'fitting in' and having to be better echoed the perception of black managers.

*'Minority groups are required to "fit in" and that includes all minority groups not just ethnic minorities'*

*'The organisation talks about diversity, but does not take it on board in valuing difference or other qualities or ways of working'*

*'There might be a potential conflict for people practising their faith because our organisation's sole purpose is to increase profits'*

*'They need to be a bit better'*

*'There may be subtle networking (going out for drinks) that results in discrimination – we might perceive someone to fit better through this kind of informal contact'*

*'The perception of a different background might prejudice promotions according to background such as culture, religion, or a name'*

### 5.3.6 White managers' perceptions of ethnic minorities' skills and abilities

There were perceptions from some white managers of ethnic minorities having different skills and abilities and exhibiting less helpful ways of dealing with customers.

*'Ethnic minorities are much more scientific oriented and have less contact with external clients – they are more office based'*

*'My experience of black staff dealing with clients is negative – they tend to use e-mail to contact clients rather than pick up the phone'*

### 5.3.7 Positive discrimination

Some white managers considered that the merit principle might have been abandoned to progress ethnic minorities.

*'The appointment or promotion of a black or Asian colleague may be to fulfil a quota rather than because of their merit, so the person would then have to perform better'*

### 5.3.8 Self-perceived attributes of white managers

They were also asked to articulate their perceptions of what it takes to be a white manager. Confidence, skills, education and style were among the important factors mentioned.

*'You have to be self-confident, have networks, have access to opportunities, have champions, have a good reputation, have support at home, be flexible, be able to pick up and move, be in the right place at the right time, personally have the drive or value the position of being a manager, look the part, make the right life choices, be in the right part of the organisation for progression'*

*'Skills are implicit, but they are not always looked at and considered, and often the subjective, non-measurable values are considered more important'*

*'Things have moved on from the past when it took "whiteness" to be a manager, in the sense of conformity, and now there is more opportunity to be yourself'*

*'This varies by region, geography, by business function, and seems to be dependent on there being someone leading on this and pushing it'*

*'Style, team culture, a level playing field, has or had access to education, more people/social interaction skills, and standing up for values and beliefs'*

*'People who wouldn't fit in are more confrontational, less professional and understanding of how the organisation works and treats people, and are self-important and narrow-minded'*

*'We need people at the top willing to break up the "wolf-pack"'*

### 5.3.9 Factors common to all managers

Some white managers thought that there were no special circumstances around being a black or Asian manager. They felt that there were factors that were common to all managers:

*'All managers need drive, commitment and motivation'*

*'You have to be brilliant, meet targets, have good communication skills, be in an organisation that supports and rewards and is seen to be doing that, demonstrate you can do the job, have mobility, be in the right place at the right time, luck, have flexibility'*

*'The job isn't different if the person is black or white, so it shouldn't take anything different to do it'*

*'However, there may be specific instances where there is a need for someone of a specific ethnic or cultural background to work in some geographical areas – these may be external issues, like dealing with a particular customer base'*

*'We don't know what our ethnic minority colleagues think'*

*'Our organisation has a very good process for measuring performance and it is also improving'*

## 6. The Space between Policy and Practice

### 6.1 Mismatching Perceptions

All I ask is that you test your assumptions after you read what I have to say. I promise to test my own. Then, maybe we can start a dialogue. At the very least, we'll understand each other better. And perhaps, with some work, we'll both be able to change some of the behaviours that prevent us from being true colleagues.

DWB extract

Our research findings show clearly that there are indeed some mismatching perceptions about race equality between strategic policymakers and minority ethnic employees. The mismatch seems to be much less about optimism versus pessimism, however (HR being more optimistic about progress on race equality than were the minority ethnic employees, as was shown in *Moving on Up?*). All groups could, for example, find some positives



about progress so far and they could identify significant areas for improvement, and all groups perceived a wide gap between policy intent and policy outcomes, as did minority ethnic managers.

The mismatch seems to be more to do with the fact that each cohort has tended to place more emphasis on different parts of the process. There were also particular nuances in how they viewed each other:

HR, for example, had doubts about their own role in the policymaking process and the dissemination of key messages. They also thought that the implementation of policies was patchy and that parts of the process, such as line manager involvement, were not working effectively.

White managers emphasised some of the management issues associated with managing race equality, such as the structure of their organisations, competing priorities and initiative fatigue.

Minority ethnic managers were focused more on aspects of the organisational culture that impacted on them negatively, such as covert racism, fitting in and the drinking culture.

Areas where there was clear agreement between the three different constituencies (HR, minority ethnic and white managers) on which parts of the process were not working included:

- lack of leadership from the top
- lack of measurement
- aspects of the organisational culture that acted as barriers to minority ethnic recruitment, retention and progression
- acknowledgement that it takes something extra for minority ethnic colleagues to 'fit in' and to make it to the top

Our data showed much higher levels of dissatisfaction with the progress on race equality from HR than *Moving on Up?* had suggested.

One interpretation of HR's overwhelmingly positive responses to the *Moving on Up?* questionnaire could be that they have a tendency to put a positive spin on data presented to the outside world. It may be fair to say that filling in questionnaires for public consumption means that there is a sense of 'showing a brave face to the world', particularly as there is now a plethora of awards that have introduced an element of competition between organisations aspiring to win recognition for their efforts on equality and diversity.

Cynics might go so far as to say that there is a tendency to view equality and diversity as just another of several opportunities for organisations to raise their PR portfolio and build reputation with customers. What we have found from this work is that HR has just as many doubts about levels of progress. They are also concerned about whether the current structures are in fact enablers in achieving race equality.

*Moving on Up?* was influential in setting a baseline from which to start to measure progress on race equality in organisations, but our research here has shown us that there is a greater need for more qualitative data – data that illustrates the more complex picture.

## 6.2 Systemic Obstacles to Implementation

In this section, we look at the obstacles to implementing a strategy on race equality.

We considered some of the issues to be systemic in

nature and some to relate to organisational culture. In reality the two are very intertwined, considering that the people developing the policies are governed by their own set of attitudes and views of the world, just as much as the target groups are.

### 6.2.1 Leadership

One of the issues identified strongly in the diagnostic sessions was a lack of leadership from the top on equality and diversity. Some of the issues with the leadership were:

- inconsistency
- contradicting what has already happened
- massaging the messages to present good news
- lack of diverse representation at the top
- fear from junior managers of jeopardising their jobs by presenting bad news higher up
- poor management of and support for existing policies and procedures

At the time of this research the top teams at senior management level in the organisations we visited were either failing to be clear about their values, goals and behaviours on equality and diversity, or else they were tending to avoid looking at real issues as they arose. It is worth speculating here whether the information supplied by HR for the *Moving on Up?* research in 1999/2000 may simply have been reflecting what was expected of them by their leadership teams in denying that problem areas existed. There are indicators from our sessions of a fear factor in communicating bad news.

A lack of diversity also affects how open top teams will be toward 'difference', and it is possible that some of the attitudes and reservations expressed about minority ethnic staff, particularly by the white managers who participated in our diagnostic sessions, are also reflected at Board level.

An important question to ask here is: **What is it that good leaders do to avoid some of the pitfalls mentioned above?**

In our *Widening the Talent Pool*<sup>7</sup> research we developed a set of criteria for effective leadership (see Appendix 1). A critical attribute of true leadership is transformational leadership – a step up from management as it draws on the more abstract qualities of those who practise it, such as being inspiring and motivational, being visionary and stimulating and acting as role models. The area of race equality urgently requires an application of some of these attributes. Companies which are being more successful in this area can attribute their competence to leadership teams displaying some if not all of these qualities.

To reach that point, however, requires leadership teams to have gone through a process of deepening their own understanding, both individually and collectively, of the issues surrounding equality and diversity, which involve both head and heart, the rational and the emotional. Systems and procedures are important but they arise out of human dilemmas that also need human solutions. Transformational leaders have the ability to internalise, embody and communicate change. There is something about who they are as people that makes a difference to the outcome, achieving consistency of messages and congruence within the organisation.

<sup>7</sup> Runnymede Trust Briefing Paper by Sandra Sangtin-Grant, July 2002, op. cit. Note 3

### 6.2.2 Strategy development and implementation process

One of the key issues of concern to us is the method by which the strategy on equality and diversity gets formulated and implemented. Our diagnostic sessions highlighted a number of areas of difficulty with the process at the moment, including:

- lack of clarity about roles in the development of the strategic framework
- poor consultation
- lack of support to HR from leadership
- little or poor-quality evidence of the impact of the strategy
- ignoring the evidence of the impact of the strategy

Where an organisation declares itself to be pursuing a strategy for race equality at all, the general belief is that it is owned and developed by the Board, and that HR has the task of implementing it through line managers. The reality is that HR is often where the strategy is developed and then presented to the Board for 'rubber-stamping'. In some cases too there is no strategy for equal opportunities and diversity, merely a reliance on paper policies and procedures.

Our findings suggest that it was difficult for participating organisations to satisfactorily answer the question: Who owns strategy development and implementation? It appears that HR in particular is caught in the middle of the process, and that there is a tendency for the ball to drop somewhere between the development of the strategy and its implementation. HR, for example, may think that its job is done simply because the strategy has been developed and communicated to line managers. Indeed, the act of communicating the strategy may well be what gets rewarded by the organisation. But what is apparent, however, from the awareness shown in our diagnostic sessions by all parties, is that the way things are structured at this time can actively work against the strategy succeeding.

Both minority ethnic and white managers feel that they don't get consulted often or thoroughly enough in the development of the strategy, which can mean that strategies do not necessarily reflect what is most needed. In addition, the measurement processes are criticised for collecting either insufficient or the wrong data, or for their absence, thus contributing inadequately to the strategic development process.

Members of HR are frustrated by a perceived lack of support from their leadership teams, which they feel then has an impact on their own credibility with the rest of the organisation. A recent study by a law firm suggested that only 42% of HR professionals believe that the most senior people in their organisation are 'genuinely committed' to improving diversity.<sup>8</sup> This would support our own findings from the diagnostic sessions.

### 6.2.3 Implementing policies and procedures

Linked to strategy is the implementation of the policies and procedures that arise from it. Some of the problems associated with implementing policies and procedures effectively identified by the diagnostic sessions are:

- lack of people resources
- insufficient training
- line manager apathy
- assumptions made that once policies are 'out there',

line managers are implementing them

- lack of awareness of policies
- interview and grievance panels not very diverse, nor well trained
- the difficulty of using the grievance process or raising complaints
- how to gain coverage of all parts of the organisation, especially when it is very large
- poor communications strategies

Our diagnostic sessions revealed the perception that there are not enough resources, and not enough training is provided so that policies can be implemented effectively.

Line manager apathy may be a direct result of lack of support in the implementation of policies, but may also be symptomatic of a denial that there are any issues. Not everyone is that enthusiastic about race equality, with some focusing more on a perception that there is positive discrimination in favour of minorities – a policy equated with unfairness.

Minority ethnic staff in particular were worried about the fairness of the grievance and complaints procedures, particularly where the composition of the panels is not very diverse (as with the Boards and senior management teams). There was also concern from both minority ethnic and white managers about the method of raising complaints, due to the fact that in some cases line managers have so little experience of dealing with discrimination cases they would handle them badly anyway.

The size of the organisation too was mentioned as creating difficulties in achieving organisation-wide coverage for policy implementation. Improved communication strategies would ensure that policies are communicated clearly and that messages are consistently conveyed across all sections of the organisation.

In *Divided by the Same Language*<sup>9</sup> we offer a number of recommendations on how to develop a communications strategy for equality and diversity, such as being clear about the purpose of the communication, and communicating at the right level in terms of what needs changing – values, beliefs, skills and behaviours (Appendix 2).

### 6.2.4 Changing organisational culture

The diagnostic sessions highlighted a number of areas that were specifically about entrenched attitudes and behaviours detrimental to tolerance and acceptance. These included:

- covert racism
- minority ethnic staff needing to 'fit in'
- a small minority ethnic talent pool
- lower expectations of minority ethnic staff
- the drinking culture
- taboos around discussing race openly

Of all the areas that need to be addressed, this is the most critical in terms of effecting lasting change towards achieving race equality. Discrimination, whether it is overt or covert, is damaging both to the individual and to the organisation. The level of anger and hurt displayed by minority ethnic managers in some of our sessions was palpable. It was as if it had been bottled up for years under cover of playing the corporate game, or 'being professional'. Now here was an opportunity

<sup>8</sup> Survey of 1300 personnel experts, reported in *Equal Opportunities Review*, July 2003 [www.dla.com]

<sup>9</sup> Runnymede Trust Briefing Paper by Sandra Sanglin-Grant, March 2003, op cit Note 4



to let it out in a 'safe' environment for the first time.

Safety was a big issue for the minority ethnic groups; in fact, during a break between sessions one senior minority ethnic manager was advised by a colleague to be careful about what he said as it would affect his chances of promotion. Thankfully, he ignored the advice and took the decision to be open about his experiences.

'Fitting in' and having to constantly prove themselves had taken a toll on several minority ethnic participants who perceived inequities all around them in terms of their chances of getting on in the organisation. They felt they had to constantly prove themselves. Interestingly, white managers and HR representatives also confirmed that they too could see that minority ethnic colleagues would have to be better than their white counterparts to do the same job.

The drinking culture continues to be a source of difficulty for some minority ethnic managers, particularly from a faith or cultural background where drinking is prohibited. This is just another way in which minority ethnic managers said they were different – a difference that in many cases worked against them in terms of fitting in or progressing to senior levels.

### 6.2.5 Different voices

One of the advantages of our research has been the opportunity to hear different voices on the same subject, voices that are normally not heard. Often research has focused solely on the voices of minority ethnic staff, which has been entirely appropriate; so this is the first incidence we know of where white managers and HR representatives have been asked to give their views simultaneously on the same subject.

It's easy to assume that other people experience the world the way we do. More specifically, it's very easy to assume that their colleagues of color face the same basic set of challenges they do. On one level that's true: The work itself is the same. African-American and other non-white managers have to make their numbers, motivate employees, hire and fire, and plan for the future. But on another level, these managers frequently contend with an atmosphere of tension, instability, and distrust that can be so frustrating they lose the desire to contribute fully or to do their best work; they may even drop out altogether. Their white bosses and co-workers are simply unaware of the 'miasma', as Keith Caver and Ancella Livers call this noxious and tenuous environment. They're often puzzled when their non-white colleagues quit, seemingly out of nowhere, or appear to over-react to what seems like a minor incident – but which is really the last straw.

*Quoted from DWB editorial introduction<sup>10</sup>*

The high levels of frustration expressed by minority ethnic staff mirror the feelings in the extract quoted here, taken from the editorial introduction to the article 'Dear White Boss'.<sup>11</sup> From the white managers and HR representatives (who were almost all white) we also heard echoes at times of attitudes towards minority ethnic colleagues similar to those illustrated so particularly in this extract.

The hopeful part of our exercise, however, was that given

time and space to consider these issues, white managers and HR were able to see for themselves that their minority ethnic colleagues might be having a different experience from their own. This was particularly powerful where we brought minority ethnic and white managers together to share their thoughts, after both groups had worked through the issues separately. We saw real potential for change from this process.

None of the challenges around organisational culture are particularly new. Similar issues were reported in *Moving on Up?*, and seem to be ongoing hurdles for organisations.

What is new is that we might have uncovered a way of raising awareness of the issues that works and is different from the normal method of diversity training.

## 7. Closing the Space between Policy and Practice

We came to see how some of our own experiences and baggage led us to perceive actions differently than they were intended. While I can't say everything was perfect after that meeting, we did arrive at a shared understanding and developed something of a shared language for addressing difficult issues or communication lapses on the spot.

*DWB extract*

Just how difficult is it to close the space between policy and practice? It will differ from organisation to organisation. And while we were able to feed back some organisation-specific comments and recommendations to our participating organisations upon completion of the diagnostic sessions, here it's necessary to present the more generic recommendations.

As mentioned previously, participants in the diagnostic session came up with a number of solutions, and some of the less organisation-specific ones are incorporated here.

For change to occur, it needs to be addressed on two main fronts:

- Organisational culture
- Systems<sup>12</sup>

### 7.1. Organisational Culture

Addressing the culture of the organisation is of paramount importance in terms of bringing to awareness some of the attitudes, prejudices and assumptions about each other that prevail among different groups. Reactions to the change process are often typified by stages such as the following:

- Denial
- Awareness
- Tolerance
- Acceptance
- Unity

<sup>10</sup> Extract from the preface by HBR Editors to the Caver and Livers article 'Dear White Boss', *Harvard Business Review*, December 2002, p. 76

<sup>11</sup> Published in *Harvard Business Review*, op cit Note 10

<sup>12</sup> In the remainder of this paper we focus on organisational cultural change. To discuss any one of the participating organisations' systems in detail here would have been inappropriate. Organisations need to map their own systems up against their own organisational cultures in order to improve their responsiveness. They also need to bear in mind that attempts to modify even the very best systems will fail if not supported by a strong attitudinal shift

## Making the Journey from Denial to Understanding

Denial	Awareness	Tolerance	Acceptance	Unity
Fear of the unknown	Fear of getting it wrong and being non-PC	More knowledge, less fear	Accepting individual and collective difference	Celebration of our humanity – sameness and differences, oneness and separateness
There is no problem	There may be a problem, but what can I do about it? It's up to them to change	I can see how this problem probably ought to be tackled	We're in this together	There is no problem, only opportunity
People are all the same, but some are better than others	Some people may be having a different and less than positive experience	It's okay for some to be different, but not too different	I'd like to know more about you – and I'll tell you about me	We are brothers and sisters
Careful, because they'll play the race card	It's possible that some people are treated differently solely because of their race	Discrimination is unfair	Each individual is unique	We are in this together

**Note.** See also Appendix 3 for 'Closed and Open Approaches to Prejudice', a list of comparatives that can be used to differentiate prejudiced from unprejudiced approaches to others on the basis of distinctions of attitude and behaviour.

A lot of the comments from the diagnostic sessions suggested that attitudes wavered between denial, awareness and tolerance. It seemed that there was some way to go to arrive at an affirmation and celebration of individual and collective difference.

### 7.1.1 Dealing with the fear

The question is how do we move from denial to acceptance? At the moment, organisations are encouraged to develop a very systems-orientated way of thinking about dealing with race equality (and all the equalities). Systems have their place and are very useful for setting goals and targets and measuring progress.

What the systems thinking does not address is the fear factor, which we believe requires an experiential approach. It is all too easy to give the impression of ticking all the right boxes, speaking the right language and yet not fully internalising the common, everyday experience of someone who is from a minority. Some of this will be unconscious conditioning, while some may be conscious and malicious.

A very important question for organisations to ask themselves is: How can we create the opportunity for our staff to have an experience of difference that is self-generated, rather than imposed from outside?

It is possible for someone currently to go through a day of race awareness training, for example, and not change any of their fundamental beliefs or attitudes at all. We believe that we have generated the beginnings of a new model, with our diagnostic sessions that shifted participants away from denial to at least begin the journey of understanding the other perspective.

'We don't know what our minority ethnic colleagues think', commented a white manager in one of the sessions.

Once the white and minority ethnic groups came together they were surprised and enlightened, not because they were being told in an abstract way, but because they themselves had spent the whole morning thinking these issues through for and by themselves. The discoveries and shifts also worked both ways, so that minority ethnic managers too were able to see the world from the perspective of their white counterparts. What was striking was that both groups already had much more accurate information about the other than they might have believed possible. It was just necessary to stop and think about it.

We would like to suggest that the structure of our diagnostic sessions provides a starting-point for a new model for change, one that focuses on the experiential and the hands-on, rather than perpetuating a heavy bias towards systems thinking. We need to address attitudinal issues right across organisations, from top to bottom, to bring about real and lasting change.

In summary, our model consists of:

- HR diagnostic session using narratives
- Parallel sessions of separate groups of minority ethnic and white managers, run simultaneously using narratives
- Both minority ethnic and white managers brought together to hear each others' perceptions, and develop solutions together
- Feedback to HR and leadership team

### 7.1.2 Creating a new story

We have already mentioned the power of narrative, of stories (see section 3). In this context, strategic storytelling can be an effective tool in the change process. It can work at any level of the organisation, but we would particularly



## Our Model for Change in Action

What we did	Outcome	Movement
Met with HR to gather organisational data	Still work to be done on filling in gaps in company data	Denial to awareness
HR diagnostic sessions carried out	As well as successes, identified many areas of mismatch between strategy and outcomes	Denial to awareness
Parallel sessions run simultaneously with minority ethnic and white managers	Both black and white managers identified numerous obstacles to progression for minority ethnic employees. White managers given time to step into another's shoes showed increased awareness of different experience. Black managers too, asked to step into another's shoes, showed that although progress was tougher for them, they too might be making assumptions on occasions	Denial to awareness
Minority ethnic and white managers brought together to hear each other's views and develop solutions	Very striking dynamic of high degree of cooperation, friendship and working towards a common goal  Desire expressed by all sides to continue the process	Tolerance to acceptance
Feedback given to both HR and Leadership Team	Integration into the organisation  Strategic planning with awareness	Tolerance to acceptance

urge leadership teams to make themselves clear about the current 'organisational story'. This will help to highlight what already works well and is worth preserving, as well as what needs to change; and will bring out some of one's own negative beliefs and attitudes.

This process can be instrumental not only in helping leadership teams build a business case for race equality, but in helping them think effectively about their business objectives. Then the way is clear towards developing a new 'organisational story' that more clearly reflects the type of organisation they would all like it to be.

Our model leaves us wondering what it would take to move the journey on – from acceptance to unity. Perhaps a powerful, individual and collective spiritual awakening is the answer; this is not an arena where organisations such as the ones in our study can necessarily take the lead.

## 8. Conclusions – Where Next?

**W**e entered this debate from the point of view of wanting to discover more about what appeared to be widely mismatching perceptions of progress on race equality between HR departments and minority ethnic managers.

Where we have ended up is with the insight shared by all sides that there continue to be a range of obstacles to closing the space between policy and practice. We have a greater understanding of some of the obstacles to bridging the gap, and some thoughts about what might be done,

particularly to address the cultural and attitudinal issues. Most of all this research has shown that the work that needs to be done depends more on who we are, rather than just on what we do.

We asked minority ethnic and white participants in their combined groups to tell us what they would expect to see, hear or feel in 5 years' time if the strategies were working. These are some of the things they said:

### *Where we want to be in 5 years' time would give us:*

- 'More diversity at all levels, with a much higher proportion of ethnic minority managers'
- 'We would hear the benefits case/business case clearly articulated'
- 'There would be a high retention of ethnic minorities at all levels'
- 'We would hear more openness on promotions'
- 'There would be better communication'

### *As a result we would see:*

- 'More news articles about how our company is a more diverse and fairer employer'
- 'We would feel part of a real meritocracy and be promoted purely on ability'
- 'We would feel proud to work for a company at the forefront of promoting or implementing diversity'
- 'We would feel more culturally aware as a result of having a truly diverse workplace at all levels'

The floor is open now for these issues to be discussed and for some new models to be developed to close the space between policy and practice. Everyone will benefit in the end.

# Appendix 1

## Effective Leadership for Achieving Equality and Diversity Targets

1. Race equality must be on the agenda at Board level.
2. Equality and Diversity should work in tandem to create a Diversity Culture.
3. Collect the data *before* you design new strategies and programmes if you want them to make a real difference.
4. The actions and demeanour of managers must be consistent with the equal ops strategies they are promoting.
5. Targets are a measurement tool (not an end in themselves) – set accurate targets to achieve your objectives.
6. Motivation to bring about change is improved as a result of full-scale involvement in all relevant decision-making.
7. Global companies operating in global marketplaces require an internal culture truly accepting of difference if they are to experience maximum commitment from staff and a correspondingly buoyant market share.
8. Diversity consciousness – among managers and resource providers – needs to be actively engaged when making key appointments.
9. Effectively managing diversity and building an emotionally intelligent workforce contributes to company success.
10. Managers will be helped to focus on the part they can play in building cultural change by giving them one-to-one coaching on leadership and diversity.
11. Building in 360-degree feedback – from bosses, peers and team members – will support behavioural change within the company and boost a manager's confidence.

# Appendix 2

## Making All Communications on Equality and Diversity Positive Communications

1. Who will receive your communication(s)?  
Different audiences – both within and outside your organisation – require different approaches, using different expressions and minimising jargon.
2. Context affects content: size of organisation, location, service sector; organisational structure and hierarchy – these can all affect how to make effective and appropriate responses to issues of equality and diversity that arise.
3. How purposeful is your communication? Is it aiming towards fundamental change, a shift in attitudes or behaviours, or increased understanding of company policies? Be clear about your intention, and support your communication with action.
4. Are you communicating at the level of values, beliefs, skills, behaviours or culture? Pitching your message correctly in each situation will produce a correspondingly appropriate response from its recipients.
5. Who is making the communication? Whether it's the CEO, a trades union official, a line manager, a member of HR or of the equality and diversity steering group who issues an equality and diversity statement, the language in which it gets rolled out within the organisation should speak clearly to its immediate audience. Effective policy guidelines are those which are supported by all through having been effectively reinterpreted and relayed within all sections of the organisation.

# Appendix 3

## Closed and Open Approaches to Prejudice

These approaches are based on the following distinctions of attitude and behaviour between those who are prejudiced against those they perceive as belonging to other ethnic groups (who exhibit closed views) and those who are unprejudiced (open views):

Closed Views	Open Views
Monolithic attitude with little ability to respond to new realities	Diverse attitudes, positive approach to difference and to change
Values and attitudes separate from those of people of other cultures	Attitudes interacting with those of people of other cultures
Convinced of the inferiority of all other cultures	Different from but not inferior or superior to any other culture
Difference as an enemy in work and relationships	Difference as the key to potential new partners and partnerships
Manipulative nature of everything unfamiliar	Sincerity taken as a given unless proved otherwise
Criticisms of own attitudes rejected out of hand	Criticisms of own attitudes always considered and debated
Discriminatory practices always defended and justified	Discrimination and exclusion criticised and combated
Prejudice seen as natural and 'normal'	Prejudice seen as problematic, to be subjected to critique

This table is reproduced from *Perpetrators of Racist Violence and Harassment: A Runnymede Research Report* by Omar Khan (London: Runnymede, 2002, p. 55); and is itself based on the 'Closed and Open Views of Islam' table from *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* (London: Runnymede, 1997, p. 5).



## Appendix 4

### Equality and Diversity Organisations

#### *The Equalities Commissions:*

Commission for Racial Equality [www.cre.gov.uk](http://www.cre.gov.uk)  
 Equal Opportunities Commission [www.eoc.org.uk](http://www.eoc.org.uk)  
 Disability Rights Commission [www.drc-gb.org](http://www.drc-gb.org)  
 Equality Commission for Northern Ireland [www.equalityni.org](http://www.equalityni.org)  
 Commission for Equality and Human Rights  
 (currently in Bill form; expected 2007)  
[www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/equality/project/index.htm](http://www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/equality/project/index.htm)

#### *Other Useful Public Sector Websites:*

Equality Direct [www.equalitydirect.org.uk](http://www.equalitydirect.org.uk)  
 Acas [www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)  
 Equal – Workforce Futures Partnership [www.equalworkforce.org](http://www.equalworkforce.org)  
 Business Link [www.businesslink.gov.uk](http://www.businesslink.gov.uk)  
 Small Business Service [www.sbs.gov.uk](http://www.sbs.gov.uk)  
 Ethnic Minority Employment Taskforce [www.emetaskforce.gov.uk](http://www.emetaskforce.gov.uk)  
 The Audit Commission [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk)  
 Accounting for People Task Force  
[www.accountingforpeople.gov.uk/index.htm](http://www.accountingforpeople.gov.uk/index.htm)  
 Better Regulation Task Force Anti-Discrimination Working Group  
[www.brtf.gov.uk](http://www.brtf.gov.uk)  
 Department for Trade and Industry  
[www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice/people/diversity-equality.htm](http://www.dti.gov.uk/bestpractice/people/diversity-equality.htm)  
 Women and Equality Unit (Department for Trade and Industry)  
[www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk](http://www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk)  
 Race Equality Unit (Home Office)  
[www.homeoffice.gov.uk/inside/org/dob/direct/reu.html](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/inside/org/dob/direct/reu.html)  
 Faith Unit (Home Office)  
[www.homeoffice.gov.uk/inside/org/dob/direct/fcu.html](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/inside/org/dob/direct/fcu.html)  
 Disability Unit (Department for Work and Pensions)  
<http://www.disability.gov.uk>  
 Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (Northern Ireland) [www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/equality](http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/equality)  
 The Scottish Executive [www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Equality](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Equality)  
 The National Assembly for Wales Equality of Opportunity  
 Committee [www.wales.gov.uk/keypubasemequalcomm2/index-e.htm](http://www.wales.gov.uk/keypubasemequalcomm2/index-e.htm)

#### *Business-led / orientated Initiatives:*

Race for Opportunity  
[www.bitc.org.uk/programmes/programme\\_directory/race\\_for\\_opportunity](http://www.bitc.org.uk/programmes/programme_directory/race_for_opportunity)  
 Opportunity Now  
[www.bitc.org.uk/programmes/programme\\_directory/opportunity\\_now](http://www.bitc.org.uk/programmes/programme_directory/opportunity_now)  
 Employers' Forum on Disability [www.employers-forum.co.uk](http://www.employers-forum.co.uk)  
 Employers' Forum on Age [www.efa.org.uk](http://www.efa.org.uk)  
 Trades Union Congress [www.tuc.org.uk](http://www.tuc.org.uk)

#### *Voluntary Sector Organisations:*

Runnymede Trust [www.runnymedetrust.org](http://www.runnymedetrust.org)  
 Black Training & Enterprise Group (BTEG) [www.bteg.co.uk](http://www.bteg.co.uk)  
 Forum against Islamophobia and Racism (FAIR) [www.fairuk.org](http://www.fairuk.org)  
 The Muslim Council of Britain [www.mcb.org.uk](http://www.mcb.org.uk)  
 The Board of Deputies of British Jews [www.bod.org.uk](http://www.bod.org.uk)  
 Fawcett Society [www.fawcettsociety.org.uk](http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk)  
 Stonewall [www.stonewall.org.uk](http://www.stonewall.org.uk)  
 Age Concern [www.ageconcern.org.uk](http://www.ageconcern.org.uk)  
 Maturity Works [www.maturityworks.co.uk](http://www.maturityworks.co.uk)  
 Disability Alliance [www.disabilityalliance.org](http://www.disabilityalliance.org)

## Appendix 5

### Dear White Boss

At various points in this report we have quoted from the article 'Dear White Boss' by Caver and Livers, which *Harvard Business Review* published in 2002. Here is the full text of that article, a thought-provoking piece of writing, which provides a basis for comparison between the European and North American experiences of work and workplace inequalities. Complementing the work behind this report, it expands the frame within which 'the space between' can be seen even more clearly.

### Editorial Introduction to HBR's publication of 'Dear White Boss'

IT'S EASY TO ASSUME that other people experience the world the way we do. More specifically, it's very easy for white managers to assume that their colleagues of color face the same basic set of challenges they do. On one level that's true: The work itself is the same. African-American and other nonwhite managers have to make their numbers, motivate employees, hire and fire, and plan for the future. But on another level, these managers frequently contend with an atmosphere of tension, instability, and distrust that can be so frustrating they lose the desire to contribute fully or do their best work; they may even drop out altogether. Their white bosses and co-workers are simply unaware of the 'miasma', as Keith Caver and Ancella Livers call this noxious and tenuous environment. They're often puzzled when their nonwhite colleagues quit, seemingly out of nowhere, or appear to over-react to what seems like a minor incident – but which is really the last straw.

We asked Caver and Livers, faculty and coaches at the Center for Creative Leadership, to write a fictional letter from a black manager to a white boss describing the miasma and what it's like to be different in the workplace. Their letter, with its attendant suggestions, draws on research from interviews and surveys with hundreds of mid- to senior level African-American managers, as well as long years of personal experience. The point, the authors stress, is not to belabor the lack of people of color in the executive suite or any other barriers that limit opportunities in corporate America. Neither is it to extol the virtues and accomplishments of leaders of difference. Instead, their letter portrays the nature of corporate life once black managers are established – the feeling that they leave some part of their identity at home and the sometimes subtle and often systemic racial biases that inhabit and alienate African-Americans. The letter may not apply to every leader, black or white, or to every organization, but these issues are more widespread than corporate America cares to acknowledge. It should be required reading for white executives – after all, companies can ill afford to allow talent to slip through their fingers.

*Harvard Business Review, The Editors*

# Dear White Boss

Keith A. Caver and Ancella B. Livers

## What it's really like to be a black manager

**D**o you remember that first management-team offsite I attended shortly after I came on board? You wanted to introduce me to the key decision makers – the people I'd need to know in my job as director of strategic planning. I appreciated the exposure, and, after the introductions and the requisite banter, I settled in to observe the team's dynamics and get a sense of the culture. As a new employee, I didn't expect to participate much in the conversation, although I was prepared to answer the occasional question about a particular strategy or offer any insights from my experience that might be relevant. Instead I got a barrage of questions about issues related to diversity – what I thought about some new HR initiatives, why Brian and Matthew can't get along, why Diane left the company, and on and on in that vein.

I answered the questions as best I could – I was a newcomer, after all, and wanted to be polite – but I went home feeling petty demoralized. Despite my 15 years of experience, despite my solid track record, my new colleagues appeared to have little interest in my business expertise. Instead, they seemed to have assigned me some special role: official interpreter of minority concerns for the organization.

You may be wondering why I'm bringing this up after all these years – years that have been by many accounts rewarding for me professionally and for the organization as a whole. It's because on that day, and on so many days before and since, I've been made to feel that my white colleagues and bosses

don't see my talents and accomplishments; they see only the color of my skin. I've wanted to write this letter for some time now, because despite all outward appearances I am not entirely happy, and at times my work suffers for it. In fact, when I look at my experience and that of my African-American colleagues, and then look at my white colleagues in this company and at you, one thought keeps resonating in my mind: It must be good to be king.

OK that's unfair. I don't mean it as an insult. I'm quite sure you don't feel like a king and may, in fact, think it's misguided or even ungrateful of me to harbour such thoughts. I know you're operating under significant pressures – to keep our division solvent, to stay abreast of current trends, and to be fair and aboveboard in your personal interactions and business dealings, just to name a few. You've been a good boss. I've learned a lot from you, and I've gotten my promotions and raises. And that's the devil of it. Everything looks fine, but it isn't.

Just as members of the royalty in medieval Europe were often shielded from the stark realities outside their castle walls, I believe you are in some ways blind to what is happening outside your office door. I truly believe you don't know how frustrated I often am – how frustrated we African-Americans often are – by the lack of acknowledgment or apparent understanding of how our experience in the workplace differs from yours, and how it affects not just our own morale but the health of the organization overall. Have you noticed that the turnover rate for blacks is significantly higher than it is for our white counterparts? Have you stopped to consider why?

You and I both want this company to succeed. Therefore, I want to find a way for us to work together better, and I don't think we can do that unless I can be honest with you. Now, I suspect you're thinking that you've got a few

honest things to say to me as well. That's fair. If we're trying to create an open dialogue, it's got to be two-way.

But that's another letter. For now, I'd like to describe to you the miasma that surrounds black managers in our everyday work lives and help you understand how it can erode my productivity and our relationship in insidious ways. I'm going to give you some examples, although I'm wary of doing so because each story, taken in isolation, may seem trivial. But please understand that I could go on and on. I could give you hundreds of examples – things that happen to me and my black colleagues and friends every single day. It's the cumulative effect that wears us down.

All I ask is that you test your assumptions after you read what I have to say. I promise to test my own. Then, maybe we can start a dialogue. At the very least, we'll understand each other better. And perhaps, with some work, we'll both be able to change some of the behaviors that prevent us from being true colleagues.

### 'I feel alienated ...'

It may surprise you to learn that I often thank you can't see past the color of my skin. We have a good working relationship, so why would I say such a thing? I'll bet you don't remember the time when you pinned me to the wall trying to get an explanation for Jesse Jackson's perceived misdeeds or (much earlier in our relationship) the O.J. verdict. How am I supposed to know? I can't explain Clarence Thomas. By the way, how do you account for some of Bill Clinton's questionable behavior? And what about Timothy McVeigh? I know these questions are unfair; we should be able to talk as two individuals about business, current events, and other topics that interest us, without race-based judgments. And yet, you seem to hold me accountable for explaining the actions of other black people as if I had some personal knowledge or culpability. It makes me

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#### Author biographical notes

Keith A. Caver is the group director of client and assessment services, and Ancella B. Livers is a manager of individual leader development at the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina. They are the authors of *Leading in Black and White: Working Across the Racial Divide in Corporate America* (Jossey-Bass, 2002).



feel like you don't see me for who I am; it makes me feel alienated from you, from this company.

It isn't just you. Look back to that day at the management offsite, when the members of the executive team saw me not as a seasoned strategist but as an authority on race relations in the company, even though I had just started and barely knew the players. And do you remember when you, Jim and I had lunch in the corporate dining room, not long after the offsite? As I placed my tray on the table, Jim surreptitiously pointed to a table of four African-Americans who were having lunch together and said, 'Can you tell me why all of the blacks are sitting together?' I was momentarily taken aback by his question. Not only was I sitting with him, a young black woman was sitting alone at another table. Clearly, all the blacks weren't sitting together. I managed to reply, 'I don't know, but I've been wondering why all the white people are sitting together.'

It may have seemed like a harmless question to you, but it struck a nerve. If Jim hadn't focused on the few black employees in the room, he might have noticed that the vast majority of the 60 or so patrons eating lunch that day were white, and, with the exception of you and Jim, all the whites were sitting with each other or alone. The blacks were doing the same thing the whites were doing – having lunch with friends and colleagues. We have the same need for socialization and acceptance that you do. Perhaps more, because for us the workplace is often an uncertain and tumultuous place, in ways you don't see. Unfortunately, rather than enjoying real conversations with our nonblack colleagues, we are often taken off guard, by awkward jokes or slips of the tongue – leading us to wonder if these comments betray underlying feelings or assumptions about African-Americans in the office.

And I'll tell you another story – an incident I didn't mention to you when it happened, because I was too frustrated and thought you might think I was overreacting. One weekend I went to the office, in my normal, casual weekend attire, to finish up a report you needed to review on Monday. In the lobby, I had the strange feeling I was being watched and turned around to catch the weekend security guard

staring at me. Although a few people were milling about and others were going (apparently) to and from their offices, I seemed to be the only one commanding special attention. Before getting into the elevator, I was stopped by an informally dressed young white man who in a stern voice asked to see my identification. This man was not even the security guard. He was someone who worked on a different floor from me, and I didn't recognize him. Please understand, I had worked here for two years, but because I was out of context, he assumed I was a thug. You might chalk it up to an honest mistake, but I can assure you he hadn't challenged any of the white people entering the building, nor had I demanded his ID.

Now, when I go into the office on weekends, I make sure to put on khakis and a polo shirt – and when I look at my white colleagues coming in wearing

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*'Each story, taken in isolation, may seem trivial. But it's the cumulative effect that wears us down'*

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jeans or jogging suits, I feel my resentment growing. What's more, this type of experience is so common that many blacks have nearly given up on getting our white colleagues to see us as nonthreatening. Little wonder so many of us remain alienated. Little wonder so many of us leave in search of greener pastures – a place where we can be accepted for who we are as contributors and team members.

#### **'I'm not sure you believe in me ...'**

I've said that, at times, I don't think you can see past my skin color. To be honest, I also think you sometimes make judgments about me – usually not intentionally – based on a set of historical and cultural preconceptions. Practically speaking, this shows up in the expectations you and other white managers have for black employees. Those expectations aren't just demeaning; they can limit our ability (and our will) to contribute.

Do you remember when Robert, our black marketing director, hired Marie,

also an African-American? Marie had worked in the marketing field for more than 15 years and had won three national awards. Her work was innovative and exciting, and she was by far the best candidate of the four Robert interviewed. Things became complicated, however, because Robert had also recently promoted a black man into a position of authority. Like Marie, this manager was clearly the best qualified from the field of candidates. After hiring Marie, Robert began to hear whispers in the halls – suggestions that he was building his own little 'ghetto fiefdom' – and before long one of his white colleagues came up to him, slapped him on the back, and said with a laugh, 'So white people aren't good enough for you?'

Robert did his best to ignore the comments, but what really got to him was that his boss suddenly seemed to take a greater interest in the details of his group's work – asking for reports and updates he'd never needed when Robert's team was primarily white. Subtly, his boss was letting him know that at some level he expected the team's performance to drop. As we talked later, Robert explained that his frustrations came less from being questioned or joked with than from knowing his department's as well as his own credibility was now suspect.

Consequently, he said, on top of his ordinary work he was going to have to expend significant energy managing his white colleagues' perceptions if he or his two new managers were to have a chance of succeeding. And the stress took its toll – his group has done outstanding work, but, as you know, Robert recently gave his notice. I wouldn't be surprised if he took Marie with him. He told you he's leaving for an exciting new opportunity; he told me he's worn out by the need to constantly defend his department.

The ribbing that Robert took may have been intended as humor, but it feeds the perception among blacks that our white bosses don't really believe in us. Here's another story for you. A black female reporter told me about a startling but open conversation she had at a convention with the CEO of a new media company. Seeking to gain greater insight into the industry, she queried him off the record about his views and hiring practices regarding blacks. He

replied that he was afraid to hire black leaders because, he said, 'If I fire them, they will sue me'. Do you think people hired under such circumstances are really given the opportunity to succeed? I don't. Do you think our white counterparts are scrutinized for positions based on the preconceived idea that they will fail? No, I don't think so either. How can we possibly succeed in an environment where our new bosses have already thought about what's going to happen when they have to fire us? I think stereotypes based on fear that have festered into 'fact' are what's behind this behaviour.

And no matter how successful and senior we are, we're never immune to these stereotypes. One of my dear, and very talented, black friends was recently hired as a senior vice president for a major financial institution. With the exception of a few initial interviews and meetings, she did not set foot in the new organization until her first day at the office. As she emerged from the elevator, she was abruptly greeted by a white male who directed her to a small cubicle and asked her to quickly put her things away as they were expecting a new senior officer to arrive shortly. In mock obedience she went to the cubicle and set her box down, only to return and inquire about the rest of her shipment that had been sent previously. As he stared at her in confusion, she smiled and continued. 'Quite frankly, I don't believe all of my things will fit in this cubicle.' She told me she almost felt sorry for the man as recognition of his error seemed to be slowly reflected in his face first by embarrassment and then by terror. He launched into an awkward and confused explanation of how they were also expecting a new administrative assistant, and how he had mistaken her ... and then he fell silent. Instead of berating him, my friend simply smiled and said, 'I understand. However, when the new assistant arrives, I hope that you will be far more gracious in welcoming the new member of our team.'

These may seem like extreme examples, but my black colleagues and I run into this type of preconception all the time. Every day. It's discouraging, but it also has practical implications for what I and other African Americans can accomplish. Research suggests that you're more likely to put me into an

assistant director's position, even though I'm fully qualified for the director's role. Research also shows that mentoring is particularly important for blacks, yet people choose to mentor others who look like them, making it difficult for us to find mentors. What am I asking you to do? Consider mentoring me, even if I don't look like you. Consider me for that vice president's job. Give me a chance at the most technical and operationally critical roles, rather than limiting me to administrative positions. Give me credit for the ability to make good, rational business decisions. And draw your conclusions about my abilities based on my track record, not on the color of my skin.

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*'The executive team saw me not as a seasoned strategist but as an authority on race relations'*

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#### **'I don't fully trust you ...'**

This might be the hardest thing I have to tell you, because we've worked together for many years and have accomplished a great deal in that time. But to be honest, our relationship goes only so deep because I feel I can't fully trust you. Here's a story for you. A black friend of mine, James, was at a business dinner with a colleague who may have had one glass of wine too many. 'Before I knew it', James said, 'my colleague was telling me about how blacks get too many breaks and how most of us aren't smart enough to be in executive positions. This is someone who considers himself my friend. This is someone who's dealing with clients, peers, direct reports – some of whom are black or at least not white.' At this point in his story James stopped and just looked at me for a moment. 'I got through that meal, and I never let on what I thought. I have never forgotten that dinner, though, and I will never trust that man. I'm always professional with him. But I don't share more than I have to, nor do I deal with him if I can get around it.'

That story has implications for both

of us. The pervasiveness of experiences like James's takes a toll on African-Americans. It slowly eats away at our ability to trust the people we work with. Whether you, personally, exhibit these behaviours or attitudes is less important than the fact that experiences such as this make blacks wary of encounters with our white colleagues. Furthermore, our mutual history in this country and the way our different experiences currently manifest themselves in the workplace often impair my trust in you. Like James, I don't let you know about it – I can't afford to. What's more, James and I aren't alone. My own uncle, who had a long and successful career in corporate America, told me before I started work, 'You have to be careful bestowing your trust; your white managers will treat you differently, no matter how well you do.' I know times have changed, but I don't know if they've changed that much, as I often find myself being cautious around some of my white colleagues. This feeling that we need to guard ourselves, and the extra work that it takes to discern our true friends, creates significant additional stress for us.

Do you think the impaired trust and chronic stress that African-Americans feel might be contributing to the difficulty of retaining black employees? Because we often don't trust you, or, it seems, you us, is it possible that blacks don't feel free to fully (or openly) contribute? Do you think James's 'friend' will appropriately use or develop the talents of his African-American direct reports? And do you think that our mutual distrust allows us to have solid interpersonal and working relationships? I'd say it means we're not likely to be as efficient or as effective as we could be. I'd say that some of us are reluctant to take risks we probably should take, because we don't think you'll support us if we make a mistake.

#### **'Race is always with me ...'**

I suspect that by now you've picked up one of the main points of this letter. Differences really do matter, although they may matter in ways you probably didn't expect. One of the big ways they matter is that race is always with us. As a friend of mine said recently, 'I don't think a day goes by that I'm not reminded that I'm black'. Another



friend once recounted a minor, but daily irritation she had to contend with early in her career. 'I used to work in a place that was pretty mono-ethnic', she told me. 'And at my job you were expected to wear stockings. But the town I lived in didn't have stockings the shade I needed. I had to have my mother send them to me. I always thought of it as a mini-Berlin airlift.' As you read this you probably think that this is such a small thing it needn't be shared. You might go on to suggest that if that's all the inconvenience race causes, we should consider ourselves lucky. Well, I know it's a small thing. But it isn't something you have to think about. And more to the point, it's just one of many small – and large – things we cope with, day after day.

Difference itself is not a bad thing. Research shows that heterogeneous groups make better decisions than do homogeneous ones. Diverse groups also tend to have better problem-solving skills, are more creative, and deal more effectively with complex challenges. And with the increasing globalization of business, we need to be able to relate to numerous ethnic and racial constituencies. But because so many organizations manage difference poorly, they may not be reaping the benefits diversity can bring. I don't want us to continue making that mistake.

So, what do we do? There's no easy

fit. We're confronting deep-seated, complex, and highly personal attitudes and assumptions – but opening a dialogue is a good first step. I think we have to be willing to ask ourselves uncomfortable questions and be prepared to deal with some difficult answers. At my last company, one of the vice presidents brought the entire senior management team together for a half-day session with five African-American managers, with the goal of putting some of these issues on the table. She stressed that the meeting was to be a safe environment and was respectful and candid throughout. Even with her comments, the meeting got off to an awkward start, but in the end everyone had a chance to ask questions and express their concerns. The senior team came to see that the experience of African-Americans at this company is different from that of whites. And frankly, my black colleagues and I saw that at time we need to drop our guard. We came to see how some of our own experiences and baggage led us to perceive actions differently than they were intended. While I can't say everything was perfect after that meeting, we did arrive at a shared understanding and developed something of a shared language for addressing difficult issues or communication lapses on the spot.

There are other ways to build awareness. My cousin, a product

manager for a large manufacturer, told me about a new initiative at her company. Each member of the management team belongs to a racially diverse 'learning circle', composed of three or four people who have been charged with studying and exploring issues of difference in the workplace. Periodically, the circle meets to discuss what they've learned and how it might apply to them and the company. It's just a beginning, but at least they've begun to uncover some difficult issues, and that's the first step in tackling them.

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I like working here. I believe in the company, in our products, and our future. But I have options, and so do my colleagues of color. This isn't a threat; I simply want you to know that I'm here because I choose to stay. I want our company to succeed, and I want to succeed along with everyone else. I'm an invested and involved partner, and I wish you could see that, in the same way that I wish you could see the miasma that muddies the work environment for me and other African-Americans. Right now, you probably can't see it, but I can tell you about it – and I hope you'll consider this letter an invitation to begin a conversation. And maybe in the future you'll see it for yourself. At any rate, thanks for listening. ■



## THE RUNNYMEDE TRUST

Suite 106, The London Fruit & Wool Exchange, Brushfield Street, London E1 6EP

Tel: 020 7377 9222; Fax: 020 7377 6622 email: [info@runnymedetrust.org](mailto:info@runnymedetrust.org) url: [www.runnymedetrust.org](http://www.runnymedetrust.org)

## ABOUT RUNNYMEDE

The Runnymede Trust is an independent policy research organisation focusing on equality and justice through the promotion of a successful multi-ethnic society. Founded in 1968 as a Charitable Educational Trust, Runnymede has a long track record in policy research, working in close collaboration with eminent thinkers and policymakers in the public, private and voluntary sectors. We believe that the way ahead lies in building effective partnerships, and we are continually developing these with the voluntary sector, the government, local authorities and companies in the UK and Europe. We stimulate debate and suggest forward-looking strategies in areas of public policy such as education, the criminal justice system, employment and citizenship.

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