



## 'THE IMPERATIVE FOR POSITIVE WORKING ENVIRONMENTS – SPIN OR NECESSITY?'

A recent study conducted for the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education by Marilyn Tyzack, looked at 7 higher education institutions that had been identified by a range of stakeholders as exhibiting elements of good practice in the areas of equality and diversity.

A researcher spent a day at each institution:

- ◆ Reviewing policies and procedures using an adapted version of the Commission for the Racial Equality Audit
- ◆ Assessing representational diversity through an audit review and interviews with key staff.
- ◆ Conducting a culture check through one to one and focus group interviews with academic and academic related and support staff as well as the trade unions.
- ◆ Those interviewed also completed a positive working environment checklist that scored their institution against a number of characteristics recognised as necessary in positive work places.
- ◆ In addition the study looked at a positive action programme for minority ethnic and disabled senior staff, run by the Cabinet Office to see whether there were any lessons to be learned for the higher education sector from this approach

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### Key Findings

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Key findings showed that:

- ◆ A number of the institutions had very advanced policies and procedures and although none of them scored the highest level (Level 5) for policies, recruitment and the development of staff, at least three of the institutions came very close.
- ◆ The area where they all failed to meet the higher levels focused on:
  - A failure to make line and senior managers accountable for the development of those in under represented groups.
- ◆ Those with the more advanced policies and procedures had been successful in improving recruitment of minority ethnic staff for both academic and academic support staff.
- ◆ There did not, though, appear to be any correlation between the maturity of an organisation's policies and the progression of under represented groups.

- ◆ There were examples of some excellent diagnostic work in some institutions to identify barriers for women and minority ethnic staff.
- ◆ There were also examples of good positive action initiatives in terms of women only development programmes for academic staff.
- ◆ In some institutions, women were making some progress at professorial level.
- ◆ There was still occupational segregation within certain areas, particularly medicine and science.
- ◆ There were some very committed and aware senior staff and practitioners trying to drive through the diversity agenda in most institutions.
- ◆ There was a definite gap between the perceptions of senior staff on the culture of the institution and the views of staff.
- ◆ Those institutions with the best policies did not necessarily have the most positive workplaces.
- ◆ The exception to the above was one institution that had focused primarily on changing the culture and achieving a positive work place. There was a consensus in this institution that, despite ongoing problems in some areas, the working environment had improved significantly since the initiative started.

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#### Findings on Representation of Minority Groups

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- ◆ As with most organisations, the senior teams continued to be dominated by all white men. (In one institution, despite having very good policies, the top team was all white.)
- ◆ There was little evidence of a focus on progression for those staff with disabilities.

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#### Views of Staff

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Staff interviews recognised what was positive about working in the higher education sector in terms of feeling supported and yet also having a huge amount of autonomy. There were, though also many concerns. These tended to focus mainly on the culture and climate. Some of the key issues are outlined below:

- ◆ Over work - with staff experiencing high levels of stress
- ◆ The feelings that where work-life balance policies existed they were merely paper exercises.
- ◆ Lack of management and leadership awareness and, expertise
- ◆ Unconscious and conscious bias by some senior staff. (Still evidence of developing and recruiting in their own image)
- ◆ A great deal of competitiveness and huge egos in some areas of academia.
- ◆ Enormous autonomy that worked against trying to achieve an organisational identity and leadership approach. External funding was a key factor here.
- ◆ Numerous cliques and in and out groups. Difficult to know the unspoken rules that allocated staff to these groups.

- ◆ Examples of some inappropriate behaviours that bordered on or were clearly bullying. Staff on short term contracts were particularly vulnerable.
- ◆ Also worrying stories from some minority ethnic staff who felt they were being treated less favourably than their counterparts.
- ◆ Divisions between academic and academic related and support groups in some institutions – fuelled by:
  - Most initiatives/positive action programmes only concentrating on supporting those in academic roles.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### Improving Representation

There are some important lessons in terms of developing and progressing minority ethnic staff from the Cabinet Office Development Programme. Their internal review of the effectiveness of this initiative found that:

- ◆ One of the barriers to success was that talent at the more junior grades had not been nurtured and developed. It was not enough to develop programmes for staff within 5 years of promotion to more senior grades.
- ◆ An open and transparent system needed to be in place to identify talent from minority groups at senior levels, i.e. women, minority ethnic staff and people with disabilities early on in their careers.
- ◆ A key requirement for senior staff should be to recognise, mentor, coach and develop this talent.
- ◆ There needs to be a general acceptance that staff at all levels can have unconscious prejudices and bias. Any programmes need to be designed to tackle this head-on. The aim should be not only to raise awareness but also to change behaviours and attitudes. These programmes should be mandatory for all staff with management responsibilities.
- ◆ Nothing focuses the mind more than making senior and line management accountable either through 360 degree feedback, their pay or some other method.

### Improving the Culture

It is not enough to assume that having good equal opportunities or diversity policies in place will ensure a good working environment.

We found that in many of the organisations there was often a covert culture that countered the preferred culture. Gerard Egan<sup>1</sup> points out the difference between the preferred culture which serves this aim and the covert culture where the beliefs, values and norms are not publicly named and are quite often hidden. Yet the covert culture drives patterns of organisational behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Gerard Egan Working the Shadow Side: A Guide to Positive Behind-the-Scenes Management – October/1994

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Is the focus on working environments spin or necessity?

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To return to the question at the start of this paper.

We would argue that organisations ignore their working environments at their peril.

There is a 50 year history of scholarly research on the importance of organisational climate. Numerous studies have examined how climate impacts on a wide range of outcomes including psychological wellbeing, workers' compensation claims, absenteeism and turnover, harassment and violence, safety behaviours, and company financial performance. A meta-analytic review of 51 climate studies conducted over the past 20 years found that organisational climate exerts robust effects over a range of people performance-related outcomes, across a wide range of work environments (Carr, Schmidt, Ford & DeShon, 2003).

Taking a holistic approach where organisations focus on their people, the structures and the climate in equal measures (as set out in the diagram below) is therefore essential. This involves not only reviewing policies, procedures and, management and leadership styles but also requires an approach that creates a vision of a positive workplace and then puts short, medium and long term steps in place to achieve this.

Diagram 1

