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Anti-racism guide for line managers

Advice for line managers on how they can play their part in tackling racism in their organisation

The CIPD's [reports on Race Inclusion](#) showed that the role of line managers is key in tackling discrimination in the workplace and in embedding anti-racism strategy. This was particularly true when examining career progression, as the research showed that 'good line management was a major factor in achieving career progression and that poor line management had acted as a barrier'.

To support employers and people professionals to act upon these recommendations this short guide offers advice to line managers on how they can play their part in tackling racism in their organisation.

Where you can make an impact tackling racism in the workplace

Organisations are a part of society and must be a part of the solution to ending racism, not a part of the problem. Stamping out racism in all forms, whether covert or overt should be at the heart of responsible business.

Organisations are the sum of the people that make them. As a line manager working within an organisation, you are integral to tackling racism in the workplace. Areas where you can make a significant impact are:

- Role modelling and leading on inclusion or promoting inclusion policies. You can also maintain the focus on tackling racism and managing that upward in your business.
- Your approach to recruitment and career progression, such as who and how you recruit, the job adverts you write, the questions you ask in appraisals, how promotions are moderated, and who you decide has talent and potential.

- Understanding how advantage and disadvantage play out in the workplace, even in micro ways, such as how you socialise with work colleagues, who gets the opportunity for the stretch assignment, the trust and relationships that you build, who is part of your internal network, who benefits from the way in which meetings are run, who gets paid more and why.
- Creating trust, and being consistent in your focus on being inclusive, such as challenging behaviours that do not support an anti-racist workplace and being an ally to staff from ethnic minority backgrounds.
- Creating a culture free from microaggressions. Microaggressions are subtle comments and behaviours that indicate to someone that the person speaking thinks they don't belong, such as asking someone who has an ethnic minority background and who has lived in the UK all of their life where they are really from. Your role as a manager is to notice when microaggressions take place and address them. You should listen, acknowledge and take action if someone comes to you as the victim of microaggressions. The aim is to create a culture where all are educated enough to understand what microaggressions look like and address them if they take place.

Many decisions and actions are down to you, and they play a major role in the overall inclusion of your team and organisation as a whole. Remember that being inclusive as a manager is integral to the role, not an addition to it.

The good news is that you can make a difference in these areas, through a clear strategy and focused practical steps. However, it's important to understand that the journey to tackling racism at work is ongoing, and not a tick box exercise. You can do more harm than good if you engage in tackling racism in the workplace through words which aren't followed up by action or following a trend rather than aiming for long term and meaningful change.

Let's look at specific actions that you can take to tackle racism in your role as line manager.

Mind your language

It's easy to unknowingly exclude people by the language that you use. Some common sayings have racist undertones which you may be aware of, or you may use phrases like "I don't see your colour" not knowing that when you do so you are not fully acknowledging your colleagues who are visibly from an ethnic minority background. Some of the common language and terms that would be helpful for you to become familiar with can

be found in the CIPD's [How to talk about race at work guide](#).

What you can do

Use inclusive language

Have a conversation with your colleagues about using inclusive language. Inclusive language avoids biases, slang, or expressions that discriminate against groups of people based on race, gender, or class. Inclusive language acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equitable opportunities. An example is avoiding using umbrella terms like 'BAME' or 'BME' unnecessarily, and instead saying people who have Black, Asian or Ethnic minority heritage or backgrounds, which is less reductive and acknowledges that this is not a singular homogenous group.

Look through an intersectional lens

Be aware that a person can experience additional disadvantage due to the intersection of their identities, for example if a person identifies as female, of South Asian heritage and is neurodiverse, they are likely to experience multiple biases. The intersectional lens helps you to keep in mind that each person's experience is individual.

Educate

Provide high quality learning and development opportunities on race, racism, being anti-racist and allyship for your team, and attend the development yourself. You could access the CIPD [webinars](#) to create something yourself, or reach out to an external provider to support you.

Hire for facts not fit

Do you recruit for cultural fit? Is there a 'type' of person that succeeds within your organisation? We instantly 'click with' those who have a similar background to ourselves, but if we only hire those people, we run the big risk of discriminating against candidates from different backgrounds. Without a thoughtful process in place, 'cultural fit' can become very personal and veer towards 'social fit', and result in the expectation that applicants from ethnic minority backgrounds should think, speak, and behave as if they were part of the majority group; this is not what inclusion looks like.

What you can do

Recruitment framework

- Build a measurable and consistent framework to tackle bias in recruitment, with

clear criteria, such as 'must have proven organisational skills', rather than subjective criteria such as 'must have potential'.

- Check your job adverts for bias, for example statements like 'strong English-language skills' could discourage non-native English speakers. Use blind CVs in which any information revealing or implying gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation and educational background are removed to help eliminate bias from that stage of the process.
- Widen your search for candidates to attract more diverse talent and also don't rely heavily on referrals, as you may end up with people from very similar backgrounds and perspectives.

Diverse recruitment panels

- A diverse recruitment panel will make that process more robust because everyone looks for something different in candidates and some will see potential where others cannot.
- As a minimum rule, never have an all-white, all-male panel. Also involving HR in the process adds a nonbiased perspective.
- An approach that many organisations are now implementing is recruiting in batches rather than one vacancy at time. This really highlights when you are recruiting a particular 'type' of person and armed with that awareness you can then make changes.

Don't forget onboarding

- An inclusive culture needs to be in place for new staff from ethnic minority backgrounds, to ensure that they immediately feel welcomed. In addition, make sure that you know what support your team need you to put in place, such as an internal mentor or coach to help them navigate the company.
- Collate data and reporting of diversity in your recruitment, such as recruitment, retention and promotion rates. This will flag up trends that you might not have noticed without it.

Include diverse voices

However hard you work to educate yourself on how to be anti-racist, you may still be blinded to policies and systems that adversely impact staff from ethnic minority backgrounds. It is important to make sure key decision-making teams include people from diverse backgrounds. Do ensure that there is not just one person from an ethnic minority background in a group, or they may feel uncomfortable to speak up and contribute, or due to majority group bias their comments may be dismissed.

What you can do

Invite colleagues from ethnic minority backgrounds to give input

Create a shadow board, this is a group of staff or external advisors from ethnic minority backgrounds that work with senior executives on strategic initiatives. The purpose is to diversify the perspectives that executives are exposed to. This can also help create future succession by engaging a diverse pipeline for the future.

Utilise your Employee Resource Group (ERG)

ERGs emerged as a key means of progressing racial equality in [CIPD research](#). They are a clear, psychologically safe channel for colleagues to be able to share their lived experiences, and a resource for you as a line manager to tap into for insights. Becoming a champion or sponsor of an ERG shows commitment and solidarity with your staff from ethnic minority backgrounds. If you do not already have an ERG in your organisation, read the [CIPD guidance on how to set one up](#).

Gain external input

If you don't have representation of colleagues from an ethnic minority background within your company, you can reach out to your [diverse suppliers](#) and customers to gain their perspective.

Another option is to seek out diverse coaches or expert consultants who can challenge, inform and provide new perspectives. This can be especially helpful for senior management who may find it difficult to be vulnerable and discuss mistakes and gaps in their knowledge publicly.

Talk about race

Talking about race can be a scary prospect, you may be afraid of making a mistake, or causing offence. However, silence on issues that matter to your staff from ethnic minority backgrounds can be just as, if not more damaging, than saying the wrong thing with the right intention. Even if you don't think that there are any issues in your business or team, it's still important to create a space for race to be brought into the conversation, or what may emerge is a culture that doesn't think that it's ok to discuss race in the workplace.

The [CIPD Talking about race at work report](#) found that only a third (33%) of respondents overall stated that they had talked to someone in their current organisation about ethnicity. Only 20% of managers initiated conversations about ethnicity and 67% of line managers reported not feeling comfortable with having conversations about race. Your ability as a line manager to help staff openly discuss issues of race, racism, and other

forms of oppression greatly enhances the team's ability to work toward developing healthier relationships in a community that values belonging and gaining full participation on committees and initiatives. This is essential to help staff move from competitive, defensive, or neutral behaviour to full collaboration with others whom they found to be strange or threatening. These approaches can improve productivity, staff morale, and retention while decreasing burnout.

What you can do

Create a psychologically safe space

It's important that you have a clear and positive intention for having conversations about race. Ensure that you have created a psychologically safe space, where both you and your colleague feel safe and that mutual trust has been created, as well as an overall organisation culture that is inclusive. Where there's psychological safety, there's a sense of dependability on one another.

To create a psychologically safe space you should be willing to be vulnerable, to admit to your own mistakes and failures, and frame these as learnings. For example, you might say: 'Don't write me off. I want to learn. I appreciate your patience with me', or 'I hadn't thought about it that way.'

In addition, when you notice it, publicly praise others for giving feedback, and be willing to step in if you hear a teammate talking negatively about another teammate.

Curiosity and good listening skills are key to creating psychological safety, asking these questions could start the conversation:

- How do you feel we as an organisation have responded to the increased awareness of the issues of racial discrimination?
- How has your racial identity affected your experience as an employee here?
- As a line manager from a different ethnic group, how could I be a better manager to you?

Address career progression

According to [CIPD research](#) those from ethnic minority backgrounds are in need of greater access to progression opportunities, greater clarity on career paths, mentoring or coaching. You may find that you have staff from ethnic minority backgrounds who have been in their roles for many years, just not quite making that promotion, often coming second. Or you find that you or others are more stringent in applying the rules with staff from ethnic minority backgrounds when they've made a mistake. Or perhaps your staff

from ethnic minority backgrounds are viewed as a riskier appointment, even when they have the equivalent qualifications to their counterparts, then you have some work to do.

What you can do

Educate yourself

Educate yourself to understand how advantage and disadvantage play out in the workplace. For example, consider who has informal opportunities to have your time and build good relationships with you. Typically, it will be those with similar backgrounds or hobbies to yourself. Widening and diversifying your internal network will provide new relationships and opportunities to challenge your perspectives on what 'potential', or 'talent' looks like.

'Call in' biased behaviour

We refer to challenging behaviour that exhibits bias as 'calling in', because we want to bring the person into a place of knowing how they can improve what they are saying or doing rather than feeling shame or guilt. Here are some examples of ways that you can do so:

- 'You mentioned that this colleague who has an ethnic minority background doesn't quite have what it takes to be a manager, can you share your thinking around that?'
- 'I know that you didn't realise this, but when you comment on that personal style it becomes very vague and subjective, let's stick to the facts about whether they deserve that promotion.'
- 'I noticed that you keep calling my colleague a nickname instead of their full name, I used to do that too and then I realised that their name had a significant meaning, and I was causing them offence, and I have learned to pronounce their name correctly now.'

Collate data

Another important element is collating recruitment, retention and promotion data for your team. If you don't currently have the data, [advocate for data collection](#) and transparency. In [2019 about 14.4% of the UK population was from an ethnic minority background](#), although this will vary by region. It's worth checking if your organisation represents the diversity of your regional location at all levels of the business. Data can take a while to gather, so it's important not to wait for the data to start working on tackling racism in the workplace and to acknowledge the problem exists and build the data in conjunction with taking action.

Create career enhancing opportunities

Lastly opportunities for sponsorship, reverse mentoring and/or work shadowing can assist your staff from ethnic minority backgrounds with career enhancing exposure to projects and teams that they wouldn't have otherwise received. Here's a bit more about them:

- **Sponsorship:** The [McGregor-Smith review](#) found that sponsorship is shown to be a key factor in the progression of colleagues from ethnic minority backgrounds. Sponsors are more senior than the colleague they are sponsoring, and actively advocate for them, not only by passing on knowledge but also by using their influence to promote the colleague when development or progression opportunities are being discussed. Sponsors also support the colleague to build a network outside their immediate circle and put into practice the tools given to them to build relationships with senior colleagues. Sponsors are invested in the colleague's personal development and progression, giving them exposure to their network and championing their visibility. Lastly, sponsors work with the colleague they are sponsoring to help bridge the gap between where they are today and where they are aspiring to be.
- **Reverse or reciprocal mentoring:** By pairing mentors from ethnic minority backgrounds with mentees in senior management, reverse or reciprocal mentoring creates an opportunity to share perspectives, learn from each other, and work towards a more inclusive company culture. It can help to break down barriers and help senior management to understand the challenges faced by colleagues from an ethnic minority background. Your staff from ethnic minority backgrounds benefit too as they can grow their leadership network in the business, and it may even open doors which have been typically harder for them to get through.
- **Work Shadowing:** Work shadowing is usually for a short space a time, ranging from a few hours to a few days. The objective of the work shadowing is to give your staff from an ethnic minority background exposure to roles or aspects of the company that they may not normally be exposed to. They benefit from seeing how other staff and teams work and gain a bigger picture understanding of how their current role fits into the business. It's a low-risk way of checking out potential career options for them.

Final tips

As a line manager the work starts with you.

1. Listen to your staff and never dismiss their lived experience or make their issues

about you.

2. Look inward and be prepared to reflect on your past and present bias that may have impacted the careers of your staff.
3. Get feedback and accept it with humility and commit to making things better.
4. Increase the diversity of your network to compensate for your blind spots and educate yourself.
5. Educate yourself, don't rely on your staff to give you all the answers. It takes considerable emotional labour for them to relive experiences of racism and bias and advise you how to fix it.
6. Work on understanding what it takes to retain your colleagues from ethnic minority backgrounds by looking at the data, examining your current policies and systems.
7. Call in behaviour that doesn't advance your commitment to tackle racism, and help individuals learn how to do better.
8. Don't assume that your staff from ethnic minority backgrounds want to be involved in work to tackle racism, but if they do, ensure that they are given credit for it.
9. Create psychologically safe spaces for staff to be able to talk openly and share their experience, without repercussions or judgement, and work on creating that space within your team as well.
10. Take action, even if the actions are small, take action and demonstrate your commitment.

Jenny Garrett

Jenny Garrett OBE is an award-winning career coach, author and leadership trainer. Her books explore the empowerment of working women and women in leadership roles. Together with her team, she uses her years of experience in coaching and leadership to support women and leaders from ethnic minority backgrounds to progress at work. As well as supporting majority group leaders in making inclusion happen. She created the first Diverse Coach Directory in the UK and is also co-founder of a social enterprise Rocking Ur Teens which connects corporates with a pipeline of future talent.

Behaviours that support health, wellbeing and engagement

Managers play a vital role in determining the health, wellbeing and engagement of their team. Research (funded by the CIPD and led by Affinity Health at Work) identified five key behavioural areas for line managers to support the health, wellbeing and engagement of those who work for them:

- Being open, fair and consistent
- Handling conflict and people management issues
- Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance
- Building and sustaining relationships
- Supporting development

Based on these key behavioural areas the CIPD has created a [range of support materials](#) to help you adopt a management approach that supports good health, wellbeing and engagement in your team by helping you explore and develop your management capability. Designed for anyone who manages people, the guidance and exercises are quick and easy to use. They can help you save time and get better results by managing people well – all of which is good for your own wellbeing as well as that of your team.