



## TRIBE & PREJUDICE

*Why the fight for diversity is so hard is written deep in our evolution and DNA. In the dim and distant past, when day-to-day survival was the primary objective, the growing sophistication of the human race and its status in the world forced a position where likeness and similarity meant safety and difference meant fear. So can we reverse millennia of programming?*

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We began our transition from pre-state to state societies 12,000 years ago. In the process, we evolved from free-roaming generalist, skilled hunter-gatherers towards increasing specialisation. Pre-state hunter-gatherer societies had little concept of war and individuals had a similar set of general survival skills. Once we began to settle down and take ownership of land for agriculture we defended it from other groups; starting the process of specialisation, with farmers producing enough to feed themselves and the soldiers needed for defence. Since then the trend towards greater specialisation has continued at what seems to be an exponential rate, resulting in the amazing advancements that we've seen. It is now, therefore, not possible for any of us to know everything; we need to work together and share our different attitudes and aptitudes to succeed. This was realised many years ago in the work of people such as Belbin in his nine team roles. And there is now increasing evidence that more diverse work forces are more effective.

But if the benefits of greater diversity in the work place are clear, why is it that progress seems so slow? To answer this, we need to return to our transition from pre-state societies because in doing so we gathered together into groups and defended ourselves and our possessions against different "others". The differences between neighbouring tribes would originally have been relatively small as they would have lived close to each other and therefore evolved in similar environments. As we became more specialised and advanced with improved agricultural productivity and transport we formed states over larger areas and came into contact with greater difference. The improved agricultural productivity also released increasing numbers of people from working the land to focus on new specialisations, increasing the complexity of society and generating more differences. And these differences, such as; race, religion, politics, country, village, football team, hair colour, weight, height, autism, psychopathy and disabilities, became opportunities



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for bigotry and aggression, particularly when societies came under pressure from factors such as resource scarcity. Being overweight, for example, could become a trigger for dislike and alienation, if the drive to raise awareness of the benefits of reduced weight is not handled appropriately. But taken to its ultimate extreme, in our worst wars, the "others" are labelled subhuman, making it possible to justify the most depraved, inhumane behaviour. It is this history that we need to address if we want to increase diversity in our work places. And since prejudice is such an ingrained tool for managing our anxiety we cannot expect to change it with logical argument alone; we need to consider all of the factors that drive behaviour.

The most challenging aspect of improving diversity and inclusion will often be addressing culture. The stated values can obviously be revised and communicated to the organisation but it is the minute by minute behaviour of the management team that will speak most loudly. Put simply we do what our leaders do, not what they say. Since much of our behaviour is unconscious, training or coaching of the organisational leaders should be considered so that they can better demonstrate and encourage a positive perspective on diversity and police the cultural boundaries appropriately. Policing of the organisations cultural boundaries needs to steer a fine line between being overly draconian, which can alienate those that are perceived to be bigoted, and overly lenient which communicates to the staff that diversity does not actually matter. In practical terms this means that when there is a transgression the disciplinary procedure should be employed appropriately; using informal and supportive steps first to try and build understanding before moving to the more formal stages. If these steps can be implemented effectively then the organisation will not only reap the benefits of improvement performance but will also play a part in improving tolerance in a world that seems in more need of it than ever. ●

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