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THE INSTITUTE OF
LEADERSHIP
& MANAGEMENT



**Gender Equality:
Unlocking Leadership Potential**



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Our Research: Why it Matters Now

In 2011, The Institute of Leadership & Management reported that:

'Although women make up roughly half of the workforce, far fewer women than men reach senior management and leadership positions. While the business case for gender diversity at all levels is compelling, progress has been glacial.'

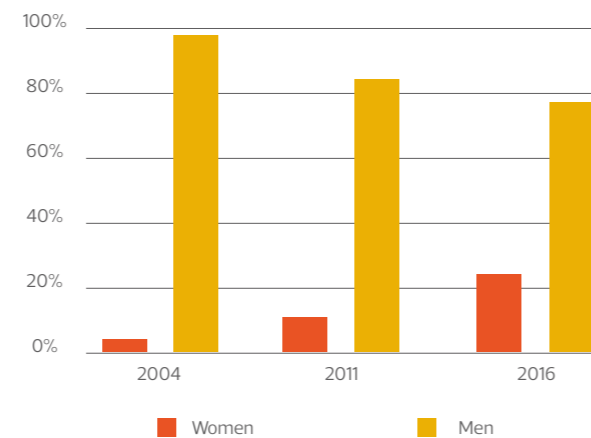
Institute of Leadership & Management (2011)

Gender equality in leadership is vital for business growth and sustainability in the global marketplace. In May 2017, The Institute of Leadership & Management undertook focus group research, via a round table debate, which explored how gender equality is understood, what organisations could do to evaluate their capability regarding gender equality and how they could encourage progress. This report outlines the findings of this research and reveals how businesses are talking about and understanding gender equality, and diversity generally, throughout their workforce. Particular focus is given to senior leadership, and strategies that have potential to bring gender equality into the heart of organisational cultures, thereby unlocking further leadership potential.

Over the last decade, much of the global focus on workforce diversity has been on Board-level leadership and senior management, i.e. 'C-suite' level (KPMG, 2016; Deloitte, 2012). In the UK, a substantial amount of the recent work carried out to raise awareness and tackle leadership diversity has also challenged the gender imbalance of UK Boards and senior business leadership (KPMG, 2016). The current focus of gender equality follows decades of work on the 'glass ceiling', which refers to perceived barriers in women's advancement into senior leadership positions, (first raised globally by the Wall Street Journal in the 1980s).

The Davies Reviews (2011; 2015) publicly challenged gender inequality and called UK businesses to action. Progress on gender equality within the UK has been slow, however, and women continue to be under-represented in senior organisational positions, with only 26% of UK FTSE 100 board positions and 34% of senior executive level management positions being held by women. (Female FTSE Board Report, Sealy, et al. 2016)

Figure 1: Gender diversity on UK FTSE 100 Boards (Sealy, et al., 2016)



The pattern of unequal representation of women in senior management and board positions is echoed globally across other sectors, including education, healthcare, public services generally and politics. For example, there has been much recent attention in the media around the lack of gender diversity in Higher Education senior management with a spotlight cast on the lack of women in Vice-Chancellor roles globally in universities (David 2015, Manfredi, et al., 2014), and particularly within in the UK Further Education sector (LSIS, 2010).





The Business Case for Gender Equality

The importance of women as major contributors to socio-economic development, both as highly educated workforce talent and powerful market consumers, is growing.

Grant Thornton (2017) highlight many studies that increasingly evidence that gender diversity in leadership is a significant contributor to business success. They argue that typically there are gendered differences in perceptions of, and subsequent responses to risk and uncertainty. Grant Thornton go on to suggest that this difference between genders provides an important advantage to businesses as it leads to a varying balance between decisiveness and careful consideration in strategic decision-making which provides the potential to improve business outcomes.

The main recommendations of the Grant Thornton report to companies include; raising awareness of gender diversity throughout organisations, not just at board level; encouraging diverse models of leadership, mentoring and role modelling; building mixed gender teams at all levels; creating cultures of calculated risk and encouraging collaborative risk management processes.

Research, by McKinsey & Co, also evidenced positive correlations between company performance and gender balance. They found that companies with the highest levels of gender diversity in senior management posts outperform competitors lacking such diversity in terms of return on equity, operating results and stock price growth (McKinsey, 2013).



Key Findings – Navigating Barriers To Gender Equality

Our research found that diversity, including gender equality, does not feature adequately on the conversational radar across many organisations. Two main themes emerged as major barriers to discussing diversity:

- The impact of unconscious bias
- The role of stereotypical models of leadership and leaders

It was felt that together these perpetuate inflexible cultures and a lack of diverse perspective in organisations.

Unconscious Bias

It was found that there was a general lack of awareness around forms of conscious and unconscious social bias across work places. It was felt that this can influence individual growth and development within organisations, and across sector:

‘...we imagine everybody is in the same position as we are because that’s how we see the world. It doesn’t occur to you that there is all sorts of other stuff going on behind the scene that you’ve got no idea about. We don’t talk about those things at all.... Some people just naturally are not self-aware.’

Sexism in organisations, especially in traditionally male-dominated sectors, was considered still to be present from entry-level through to senior leadership. Much of this sexism was felt to reflect lingering stereotypical social norms that are perpetuated through gendered language, behaviours and role expectations, particularly in certain settings:

‘There’s no doubt there’s still a chauvinism around. I’ve seen prejudice at that industrial level...’

‘...in certain industries ...there is just this inherent sexism ...because of assumptions about what’s needed for entry’

‘...a group of barristers that were responsible for the pupillage community [said] to me, “Ultimately, when we get applications, you’re all very qualified, you all have amazing CVs but for men it’s can we go to the

pub and have a drink with you and for women it’s will you look good in the office?’

Unconscious bias continues to permeate organisational language, conveyed through policies, contracts, images, communications, and processes, which impact on individuals, sometimes overtly, and sometimes subconsciously:

‘...there was a sign saying ‘Men working overhead’. You say, “Well, why doesn’t it say people? You’re telling everybody that walks past that only men can do that job.” It’s something that sounds silly, but actually that, across the board, pervades everything that we see and hear about what we can do and it makes a huge difference.’

‘...What’s the image we put out to new people as they arrive of successes and how they can achieve success? If we look at organisations and the measure of success is, if you like, masculinised, what does that do to people?’

‘...sometimes actually it’s also pictures of all white men laughing away and it’s like: do you not recognise what this is showing!’

Our research reveals that bias is often perceived as embedded within more informal organisational cultures, such as through ‘presenteeism’ (working long-hours for show), and within traditions of work place socialisation that could exclude certain demographic groups:

‘In some industries, like the building industry, it’s a tradition of hard drinking... Friday early doors... Sometimes that just goes too far. It can ...isolate people’

We also found evidence of unconscious bias reflecting a lack of leadership diversity regionally at senior levels across the business sector, particularly in the more northern areas of England. Here, leadership platforms and events were reported as often dominated by white middle-class, middle-aged men and therefore lacking in diverse role-models which was felt to send the wrong kinds of messages to aspiring future leaders:

'We have noticed that we seem to have a greater proportion of senior females within our London offices rather than other offices around the UK. I don't know the whys and wherefores of how we got to that point, but part of what we're exploring is then actually having role models. Seeing those people makes a difference to people being able to progress.'

'[X Event] was appalling... The domination of men in black suits, predominantly white. The people who had organised that [event] know better. They are the people who are talking about diversity, who are supposed to be promoting it and yet they were responsible...'

Our research also highlighted concerns over 'tokenism'. Although some progress has been made in raising awareness of gender imbalance, people moving into positions where they were the face of 'diversity' encountered additional complexities. We found that employees with potential may be actively discouraged from senior roles if they want to be recognised for their work rather than their gender, race, ethnicity or other elements of diversity:

'...getting rid of that mind-set that says, "I am the token woman.", "I am the important diversity" ...As an individual, it can still be a kick in the teeth and it is quite hard to have that self-confidence to really know that is... it is a really difficult balance.'

'Making sure that there is proper representation on boards is really important. Not tokenism, a proper representation and training for that, so people understand when they move into a board what it is going to be like and how they can contribute and how they can be resilient to a particular dominant culture that might exist on the board.'

Stereotypical Leader(ship)

We found that many sectors still hold on to stereotypical models of leadership and leaders, often referred to as a more transactional or task-orientated leadership model. These stereotypes generally reflect 'masculinised' expectations of leader behaviour including notions of strength, competition, rationality and assertiveness. Furthermore, this dominant model had not allowed enough space for more relational leadership approaches and behaviours to develop; these were perceived as feminised notions, such as collaboration, support, empowerment, transparency, mentoring and the acknowledgement of vulnerabilities

as a way to balance strengths and weaknesses in senior teams.

'...it's not just about men and women, it's about masculinised and feminised. ... and that many, many feminised qualities - and we're talking about identity here - become eclipsed by more masculinised. ...men and women alike become more masculinised in many organisations, not all, but in many organisations, as that's seen as the route to success... what I would

call feminised, those qualities that we associate with feminine, that men and women alike have the capability of doing, of engaging...'

We found an absence of balance in leadership language and behaviour, drawing on both masculinised and feminised notions, within leadership recruitment. However, this was seen as a challenge in the face of the persistence of what was termed a 'stale, pale, male image', fuelled by unconscious masculinised bias, which was often at the heart of recruitment processes.

'...we have a very narrow view of what leadership is. As soon as we broaden that view of what leadership is, you broaden the ability for different people to fulfil that as a leader.'

The lack of diverse perspectives in leadership, in addition to lingering social norms and biases relating to professional role-types, was sustaining inflexible organisational cultures.

This, consequentially, discourages demographically under represented applicants from seeking senior positions, resulting in continued lack of diversity and diverse role models. Individuals reported they would be likely to struggle to see themselves as embodying the stereotypical leadership behaviours.

'I think if you don't see Asian women or if you don't see that kind of welcome in an organisation you're thinking, "Well I'm not sure I'm going to be able to get in here, be happy and actually remain." ... there are people in every community capable and able'

It was felt that equality, diversity and inclusion were not adequately discussed within organisations. This results in forms of unconscious bias and stereotypical leader(ship) within organisational messages and sector attitudes that leads to a lack of inclusive policies and practices which results in subsequent low levels of workforce diversity.



“

Leadership theories have presented accounts of gender-neutrality or displayed gender blindness but have inevitably imported masculine values and characteristics as the norm...

Professor Jackie Ford (2015:239)

Evaluating Organisational Culture, Policy and Language

We found strong support for the need to review organisational policies, contracts, documents and communications, including text, imagery, branding and videos, in the light of the potential for bias and how this might lead to the exclusion of women, or other demographic groups. Particular emphasis was given to language relating to leadership expectations and behaviours, including recruitment strategies. To understand and identify potential biases within these areas, requires a fresh evaluation drawing on inclusive and broad ranging cultural and demographic perspectives.

'We're doing a task at the moment of going through all our standard contracts and trying to make the language gender neutral because why does it say 'he' or 'him' or 'his'? Does that not apply to me? It's simple things like that, but I think we underestimate the impact that has on people... of what they perceive they can do.'

'One of the things I will ask people is, "What is the image that comes up when you think about leadership?" You immediately get the institutionalisation of what leadership is... people realising they have an image, a way of thinking, a mind-set of what leadership actually is.'

The best strategy for exploring potential bias involved data and information collection and analysis to monitor gender and other inequalities, and combining this with conversations to open-up dialogue around diversity. Evaluation was viewed as a vital component for assessing the status quo within an organisation and seeking to change inflexible processes that potentially exclude or isolate individuals.

Building Awareness Through Dialogue and Training

We found strong support for raising the awareness of diversity through open dialogue and training. Furthermore, it was felt that a helpful way to build inclusive cultures would include developing transparent,

safe spaces through which to share perspectives, explore bias and learn about differences in ways that encourage healthy discussion and action from all. Investing in relationship building and developing high levels of trust in teams and throughout organisations is vital to develop diverse cultures of flexibility and adaptability.

'...you need those environments where ...you can have those safe discussions but you've got to have it as well in a balanced way with everybody... so that the onus isn't always on the person in the minority to be flagging up the issues'.

Safe-spaces, including forms of organisational group education and training, are helpful ways to engage people, examples include; workshops, provocation events and external partnerships and liaison, as well as more individual one-to-one programmes, courses and self-study approaches. Organisational investment in diversity training is important.

'...we've run ...provocative conversations within a group... What that then does is people walk out of that, back to the workplace and they are likely to carry on that conversation. ...it's a mainstream thing ...saying it is okay to talk about gender issues and perhaps gives the people some of the language they want to use or feel comfortable with to talk about their gender issues.'

Our research found support for guided examples of how to engage with appropriate language, terminology and behaviour which would help people engage with different perspectives, and highlights the potential benefits of developing links with networks and communities that could be helpful in enabling dialogue internally and externally.

Embedding a Growth Mind-Set

A growth mind-set was understood as a way to encourage and develop people, especially those who may lack the confidence to seek professional growth opportunities. One suggested approach involved drawing on tools to help people explore their potential and reflect on their own performance and capabilities.



It was also felt that it is important to build transparent and open cultures that Please reference this report as follows: Institute of Leadership & Management (2017) "Gender Quality: Unlocking Leadership Potential", available from www.InstituteLM.com/resourceLibrary/GenderEqualityUnlockingLeadershipPotential.html

Gender Equality: Unlocking Leadership Potential embrace exploration through learning and development.

'...within an existing company or organisation, having [an] appetite and open-mindedness to listen and accept and hear new ideas, things that they've not perhaps explored before in the past... I suppose the mind-set and culture of the company is a big thing that can affect that.'

A growth mind-set was also seen as a way to shift performance management 'language' towards a culture of performance development or talent management.

Embedding the review process as an exploration of an individual's holistic capacity for growth and impact, including the ability to progress into other areas of the business, and not just 'up' through the pipeline, was viewed as a more inclusive way of encouraging growth, particularly in leadership talent. This does not necessarily mean re-creating performance review process, but re-engineering them to contain more inclusive language and looking beyond specific job-roles and required descriptors to behaviours, contribution and impact.

'...moving towards the growth mind-set that's beginning to emerge ...revisiting and recalibrating the whole idea of performance management ...looking at how people are entering organisations ...and they see it as a place they can grow rather than a place they're going to be judged and tick-boxed. ... I think if people step into an organisation feeling like, "I can grow here and I can learn here and I can develop here," what a great start

'...create some frameworks and some matrix's around 'what does that pathway look like?' and also how does that look if you actually want to take a bit of a sideways step?'

In order to embed a growth mind-set, self-reflection, with particular emphasis on exploring unconscious

bias, is necessary. This can be achieved by training, workshops, and tool-kits such as unconscious bias questionnaires, as an effective approach to explore personal perspectives and consider areas for self-development. 360-degree performance reviews would be a potentially helpful tool for development.

Investing in Coaching and Mentoring

Embedding coaching and mentoring throughout organisations was frequently highlighted as an opportunity to support greater diversity. This is an empowering way to help people build confidence and encourage growth by role-modelling inclusive behaviours and practices, and helping people to realise their own potential.

'People don't realise what they're doing on a daily basis. They don't realise where they are until someone feeds back to them and says, "Do you know what? You did that really well."

'I think that idea of mentoring for me is absolutely essential for women or an ethnic minority coming into an organisation. This is where the change will happen ...if you're committed to provide the support and the confidence and the aspiration that's needed, as well as the personal development that might be needed.'

Building coaching habits into cultures within organisations to enable open-discussions and to challenge perceptions, could be developed and embedded through training. Encouraging sponsorship, pairing-up with associations or advocacy groups to form critical friendships is also a potentially helpful way to mentor and coach teams, particularly in areas lacking diversity. Building cross-sector partnerships to aid peer-to-leadership coaching and mentoring, and engaging internal 'reverse mentoring' schemes where more junior employees mentor more senior employees to help share different perspectives, build connectivity, awareness and confidence is another practical suggestion.

'...reverse mentoring', where a senior person is with a junior, female or ethnic minority person and it's about teaching the senior person how the impact of their actions are on the other people in the organisation.

... That feels like it's ostensibly about training the top person but it's also improving connectivity all the way through'

Despite being perceived as a resource heavy investment, coaching and mentoring are highly valuable, especially so when used to aid the development of self-reflection, realisation of potential, and to build trust and confidence across teams and individuals.

Showcasing Impact and Contribution

Our research found a need to showcase gender equality, especially the importance of making showcasing focussed on the project or work impact, rather than the persons "inequalities".

We found strong support for a move away from tokenism, and use showcasing to demonstrate the impact that diverse and inclusive cultures can bring to organisation. Managers and leaders should look for opportunities for interesting collaborations and contributions to their organisation's vision and mission, and showcase these in a way that ensures people feel valued and respected.

'...that idea of showcasing diversity as opposed to necessarily showcasing, let's say, female role models. That goes to your point I think about difference, doesn't it ...to say, "Look what difference, difference can make? Here's an example of where the diversity of not only gender, but diversity of view, of world view, etc. has made a difference and has given us more options" and so on.'

Further recommendations to showcase contribution and impact included utilising the performance development review, and developing schemes of recognition.

This included: employee nomination schemes; self-promotion schemes; company award schemes; company blogs or news-feed articles; and champions to 'talent spot', encourage people to take part, seek out examples and make nominations.

'I think there's an element of just building confidence as well. I think a lot of organisations forget to say, "Well done, you're doing a great job."

While healthy forms of competition are helpful, it is

vital to also have ways to subtly thank people and demonstrate that their work is valued. This is especially the case for people who are not naturally comfortable either being in the spotlight or self-promoting; it is important to try to encourage them to take pride in their work and to be involved.

Developing Inclusive Recruitment Strategies

When reviewing how organisations can build and encourage gender equality and diversity through seeking, encouraging and nurturing potential talent, we found particular emphasis was given to internal talent spotting and actively seeking out individuals with a balance of behaviours and skills that complement and add to senior teams:

'Instead of just waiting for people to put their hands up, do we go to them and say, "I think you could do this, you should be applying to this role."

'...It's not looking at what you've always had because you'll get what you've always got and this is an evolving, changing world. It's that wider view and being innovative.'

We suggest an in-depth review to identify and address anything missing from the recruitment process, and to ensure that unconscious bias was not conveyed through messaging. This would examine external and internal recruitment language, literature, imagery, branding, adverts, contracts, along with HR and recruitment policies, processes and procedures. Specifically, also review the language used in job descriptions and person specifications around the skills, experience-level, qualities and behaviours sought, especially in leadership roles.

'...in male-dominated environments, you've got men that often design in the recruitment process, men that are designing the adverts. You just look at the gender language that goes out. Often it's not going to naturally attract women or they're not going to see themselves in it...'

'...one of the big issues is a bias and I think it is so subtle it is not fully understood. If you look at masculinised and feminised, how many of those more senior roles are described in terms of more feminine

terms?’

We found a need for a balance of behaviours and perspectives, not just a balance of individuals being recruited, but also in ensuring that there is a balance of perspectives across recruitment teams and interview panels.

‘if you don’t actually have the people at the senior level that are recruiting in a diverse way and that people coming to your panels or your adverts don’t see that welcome sign, then they’re not going to think it’s for the them.’

‘...at senior levels you could actually very easily go and look through those recruitment processes and say, “What is missing from this?” Not what bias is there, but what is missing?’

Our research also advocates looking more widely at the labour market and the organisation’s long-term needs, to see how strategies beyond filling an immediate vacancy could help attract and encourage a diverse pool of candidates and position companies as an employer of choice.

‘...having a pre-recruitment programme, post recruitment feedback, active engagement in different ways, which means work experience opportunities internships, apprenticeships. All the other things that you can do actively to understand the local workforce, potential workforce you have.’

Encouraging Ownership and Taking Action

Our research concludes that senior managers must commit to, and lead the agenda for organisations to build sustainable cultures of gender equality, but this would also need to permeate to all levels of an organisation.

We found widespread criticism of tokenism as an approach to rectify gender inequality, and particularly how this often seems to place the onus on women to take action. We encourage ownership at all levels and call for an organisation-wide response:

‘I think it has come from the leadership of the organisation and a commitment to do this’

‘...gender equality or diversity is really a white men’s issue to be informed by the other groups that actually the change’

‘I think conversations about gender have tended to be about women taking action about gender and that generally, I’m kind of thinking in my head now, it’s about men needing to take action or be as informed... The onus is on men.’

We found a consensus that the equality agenda, as well as other diversity and inclusion agendas, is unique to each organisation; as are the challenges they face such as sector differences and matters reflecting geographical location. There is a realism that diversity concerns cover such a diverse agenda that organisations ‘can’t do it all’ immediately, and so must have a realistic short-term and long-term strategy, ideally based around their own unique challenges.

‘...when I’ve done consultancy work that you can’t sometimes do it all and that sometimes trying to do it all means that you do nothing. Actually, you’ve got to prioritise where we go. I think some organisations really struggle with how to put that message out there that it’s not that we’re ignoring a group, but actually, “We’ve got to build this. There’s a big risk here. There’s a massive inequality. We’re going to do some work on this and then next year we’re going to do some work on this. Then next year we’re going to work some on that.” It’s okay to have priorities I think... we’ve got a really good mix of culture and race and beliefs, but we’re struggling to get enough senior women into our business, so that’s what we’re focusing on right now. I think at the moment we’re trying to hit all the boxes. That’s why I think the progress is slow. We’re coming from a place where [we have] a massive percentage of white men.’

We found a strong consensus to clearly define vision and strategy, plan effectively, take action and then monitor and review progress regularly. This necessitates clear planning and to prioritise realistic goals and targets; this is vital in any attempt to shift organisational culture and mind-set, in order to achieve and sustain a transition to a more inclusive space.

Top tips for fostering gender equality, and diverse and inclusive cultures

- Invest in people development and gender equality awareness training
- Create safe spaces for learning and exploring differences through healthy debate
- Evaluate leadership language and organisational policies for the potential for bias
- Showcase the contribution and impact of diverse perspectives
- Actively seek out and encourage diverse role-models
- Develop inclusive recruitment processes and talent management strategies
- Enable distinctive growth through diverse coaching and mentoring
- Encourage ownership of diversity and inclusion by calling all to action

Top tips for planning

- Clearly define and articulate a vision for gender equality, diversity and inclusion
- Evaluate the current organisational picture and develop an informed and target-orientated strategy
- Consult internally and externally with relevant parties; seek advice from specialists if required
- Plan action clearly by setting realistic targets, priorities and timelines; allocate sufficient resources and set clear expectations around monitoring and responsibility
- Monitor progress and review targets and progress at regular intervals
- Evaluate vision and strategy holistically at regular intervals, adjusting and developing as required



Key Recommendations for Fostering Inclusive Cultures

Many ideas for encouraging diverse and inclusive cultures in organisations were put forward within the focus group discussions. Several themes emerged, including:

- Evaluating organisational culture, policy and language
- Building awareness through dialogue and training
- Embedding a growth mind-set
- Investing in coaching and mentoring
- Showcasing impact and contribution
- Developing inclusive recruitment strategies
- Encouraging ownership and taking action

Call to Action

The case for leadership gender equality and diversity is compelling and there has clearly been much work done to raise awareness around forms of bias in organisational leadership. However, as the focus groups highlighted, there is still much work to be done to explore and develop gender equality in business leadership, not just at senior level but throughout organisations. This resonates with other research findings (KPMG, 2016a; McKinsey, 2015). It is vital to keep gender equality on the conversational radar.

The key message arising from this research is that gender equality can only arise through a deep level of commitment at all levels within an organisation. To be effective this must be supported and sustained through a strategic approach to organisational development seeking to foster and embed an inclusive culture through valuing the contribution of diverse perspectives, ideas and experiences. Redefining leadership language and behaviours, encouraging diverse role-models and embedding self-reflection into practice through training, coaching and mentoring, are all steps towards a common goal of equality that organisations should take.

Focus Group Questions:

1. How comfortable do you feel discussing gender equality in professional spaces, and how is it talked about in the various fora to which you contribute?
2. How can organisations evaluate themselves and their leaders and managers at all levels to analyse any potential for gender bias?
3. What helps support women's advancement from entry-level through to senior positions and what strategies could organisations use to attract, retain and promote female employees into senior positions?
4. Considering the phrase 'unlocking leadership potential' what does it mean to you?

Methodology

The round table event organised by The Institute of Leadership & Management facilitated three 120-minute focus groups. Twelve individuals, including CEOs, directors, advocates, business consultants and coaches attended the event. Sector representation included construction, mining and engineering, education, the legal profession and several advocacy associations representing BME/BAME, disability access and gender diversity in leadership within particular sectors. A thematic approach was taken to develop a rich data narrative allowing themes to emerge from the data, as a more inductive approach, rather than through prior

assumption, theories or findings.

The discussions also focussed on other demographic groups that are under represented in the workplace, such as ethnic minorities. Most of the recommendations put forward to advance gender equality apply as much to other groups under represented at leadership levels.

Overall, the discussions at the round table event were rich and interesting offering a variety of perspectives, experiences and ideas around equality, diversity and inclusion in professional spaces.

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Facilitated by:

Kate Cooper, The Institute of Leadership & Management
Dr Fiona Creaby, The Institute of Leadership & Management

Neena Dhaun, The Institute of Leadership & Management
Phil James, The Institute of Leadership & Management

Participants:

Eve Holt, DivaManc
Atiha Chaudry, Greater Manchester BME Network
Simone Roche, Northern Power Women
Flick Harris, Manchester Disabled People's Access Group
Tara Hewitt, Transgender Equality Legal Initiative
Tim Griggs, Arup
Dame Kathy August, University of Salford Business School
Caroline Thomas, Arup
Sue Congram, Engendering Balance Ltd.
Sarah Hopes, Carillion
Loretta Lipworth, Balfour Beatty
Mike Wilton, Arup



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Institute of Leadership & Management, Pacific House, Relay Point, Tamworth B77 5PA www.InstituteLM.com +44 (0) 1543 266886