



CHARTERED INSTITUTE
OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Engage podcast: Doing diversity differently

Guest presenters: Avril Lee, Katrina Marshall, Melissa Lawrence, Sarah Hawthorne

Transcript

Iain 0:09

Hi, and welcome to the CIPR Engage podcast - "Doing Diversity Differently". Diversity is about far more than just ticking boxes. And as the newly published State of PR report shows there's still much more for the sector to do to better reflect the society we live in and communicate with.

In this debate we highlight the findings from the report, looking at why the PR industry is still struggling to attract diverse talent. And what organisations should consider when shaping their diversity and inclusion programmes and policies.

Avril 0:46

My name is Avril Lee and I'm the chair of the Diversity Inclusion Network at the CIPR and today I'm joined by some really great guests on how we can deliver diversity *and* inclusion in comms, and to talk about the role that PR internal comms practitioners can play in driving change more broadly. Diversity is far more than just ticking boxes and with the CIPR's recent report, Race in PR and the State of the Profession finding that our industry's still 91% white, it's clear change has been slow and there's still much more to do for the sector - that we can do better to reflect the society it communicates with.

So, let me introduce today's guests. Today's guests are firstly, Katrina Marshall, who is a lifelong news hound and a lover and a writer of words, and she's carving out a new existence in local government as the Comms Officer for Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council. And she also says she's powered by plantain, curried goat and her mum's love so there you go!

We're also joined by Melissa Lawrence, who is the CEO of Taylor Bennett Foundation, a charity that exists to address the need for greater ethnic diversity in the PR and comms industry, and I will add that the TBF has worked for over 10 years to make a difference and has been fundamental to the change that we've actually seen in our industry.

And our third guest is Sara Hawthorn, Managing Director of Infusion Comms. Sara's agency's one of the first to be awarded the Blueprint Ally status and that's a real achievement. It's the first diversity mark solely focused on ethnic diversity, and it really is a good guide to making a difference going forward. Sara has appeared on a number of sector panels, discussing inclusion and speaking about her own experiences as a deaf individual in the PR world. So that's a really good line-up of people, I think you'll agree.

So, I'm gonna start off with my first question, and I really wanted to really start by mentioning the Race in PR report. That report drove a lot of discussion about what was going on in our industry, and obviously it was created before the Black Lives Matter movement, and it came out shortly after George Floyd's murder. And it really, I think, grabbed the industry because of that. I was wondering, really what your personal thoughts were, having read it? Katrina I was gonna start with you - what was, sort of, your personal take? It's a hard read, I think, for anybody from a BAME background. I didn't know what your takeout was, after reading it?

Katrina 2:54

I mean, I walk around in black skin, as do my ancestors. I'm not sure how that report could have read, other than as painful. And painful because it's historical exhaustion, which is not something that is unique to the comms industry. It's historical exhaustion because the message is not new. The information is perhaps better stratified, the data is perhaps better analysed, is perhaps better accessed by people who would ordinarily not have been able to access it – but there's nothing new. It started to make me wonder if we need to be dialling even further back with research...with regard to research. Are we asking the right questions of the right people to get the right information? Or are we asking the questions that make us feel better about doing another report – to get the answers that make us feel better about having done a report...a survey and the report in the first place? Because if what you're getting is a recurrence of the same information, the same formulaic peak of noise in the social conversation just after and then, much like the anatomy of a moral panic, it dies out and ebbs and flows - and we're back here again in 20 years. Are we then grinding down to what is really important, which is what is changing about the questions?

The landscape hasn't changed, the access to information hasn't changed - it's gotten better. There's a cohort of young people who are not nearly as naive as some of us were when we started in comms. They're questioning, they are deeply critical, and you need to kind of, you need to show up when you talk to them. None of that has changed the fact that nobody looking like me and Melissa makes it to the C-suite without a bloody nose, and a whole lot of stories to go with it. That was my takeaway.

Avril 4:45

Melissa, what were your thoughts on the report?

Melissa 4:49

It was an interesting mix of thoughts. There, sort of, initially wasn't anything that was truly surprising, but I guess the report was basically no-holds-barred. It was, you know, the sort of words that leapt out of, you know, the pages were quite uncomfortable in places, and slightly horrifying in other places as well actually. But then equally I remember, I was thinking at the time that people are still happy to work in the industry. I think there was an overwhelming percentage of people that said that they were proud to work in the industry and to be part of the profession.

But I remember at the time - because you know I'm coming at a slightly different angle as the chief exec of diversity charity, encouraging people to come into the industry - there was a part of me that thought "Oh! Gosh. Why am I actually doing this? Why are we doing this if it's just so terrible?" But, you know, I just, I thought it was a very insightful report and what it made me think, despite the things that I have also just said, is that all the answers are in there as to how to make things better.

And I do agree with all of the things that Katrina said. You know, we shouldn't be at this point now, it's very, you know, repetitive - it's the same thing. This conversation was happening, probably actually 12 years ago when the Foundation was initially set up, and the BAME population sat at 6.3%. But I do think we are at a turning point now with all of the things that have happened: the George Floyd murder, the global pandemic, how the general global conversation around racism in all the different sectors and industries and in PR. And literally, all the answers are in that report as to what we can do to make the change.

Avril 6:44

And there are some really positive stories. I think we were talking the other day about...there has been positive change. But as the CIPR we decided to do that report because we could see everybody talking about it and saying change was needed but nobody was really addressing the realities and so we didn't pull our punches, you know, on purpose. But I know some of it is highly repetitive, and I totally understand that.

Sara what was your thoughts, as somebody from a non-BAME background but obviously from a diverse group as well, and having to face some of those similar challenges?

Sara 7:11

I mean, I echo what's already been said and that none of it was particularly surprising. It was kind of disappointing to read in many ways because it didn't feel it we've come very far. But I agree that it was a powerful report, that came out at a really important time.

What struck me about a lot of it was the importance of socio-economic background in it. So that for me was quite important and I think we don't often talk about intersectionality enough in this kind of situation. And, you know, you can be black and disabled and come from a lower-class background, you can be black and abled and come from an upper-class background. It's like, we don't talk enough about all those different facets as well - it's very flat and not multi-dimensional, and I think we need to start having those conversations a little bit more, and have it as a more holistic discussion, if you like.

Again, there's some interesting things that came out about the desire to get to boardroom level, as well. I think that was interesting for me when I was reading it. Although people want to stay in PR, the overwhelming feeling was they didn't really want to progress to boardroom because it's not a nice place.

And my feeling is that's something quite shameful - that we should be really thinking about. If someone says that we are not creating a nice environment, we should be pretty ashamed by that and taking it seriously.

And I am concerned that maybe in another three, four or five years we get a similar report out and we've still let people down. But it is a real concern, and I would like to be positive about it and I'd like to remain, you know, upbeat and optimistic, but particularly in the disability and inclusion stuff that I've done, the history doesn't really lead us towards particularly being optimistic about it, I think. So, I'm probably a little cautious about the impact that it's going to have in real terms. But I'm glad to see the report there, and I hope it is used in a productive way

Avril 9:04

I think you make a valid point because actually the boardroom is not right, and the lack of role models etc. actually speaks to the lack of an inclusive culture. And actually, that people feel that they can't succeed, or they don't want to stay within the culture to do that.

And Sara, you're an agency boss. I mean, who do you think is responsible for driving that cultural shift, or making sure we're not having the same chat in three to four years from now?

Sara 9:27

I've thought about this question a lot, actually. I kind of feel like we're making it into this hot potato that nobody wants to touch. I feel like we're passing it over and going "Well, you take responsibility for it, or you do." We see it as a chore. It's like a thing that we should do or have to do, you know. And that approach, in itself, is negative. And why aren't we viewing it as an opportunity the same we view business growth and people getting excited by going out in a new pitch meeting? Why aren't we having discussions around, who really wants to get on board and get involved in that because it's amazing opportunity? And when we start talking about whose responsibility it is, you give people an "out" as well, I think, because they can, they can opt to step back from that and say: "Well actually, we're designating into HR," or a designate it to a specific and EDI person, whoever it is, you know. I think we need to reframe that question a little bit and instead say "Right, how're we going to do this, who's on board? This is an amazing thing we're going to do. Look all the opportunities here - be part of it." And try and change the discussion rather than, "Well, I'll take responsibility," or "You'll take responsibility," or something like that.

Avril 10:36

You see, I'm a bit more cynical you see, because I think, people have been talking about this for ages, and they put a couple of bullet points on a slide and HR comes up with a bit of a policy, but actually fundamentally it doesn't change anything. That's why for me I think - I've said before - I think if senior leaders, literally aren't doing it, then how do we make a difference?

Melissa, what do you think on that one?

Melissa 11:00

So, for me, I absolutely think it needs to sit with everyone. And I absolutely think it should be driven from the top down. So, you know, we work with lots of different organisations who will talk to us about their diversity efforts and what they're doing, and there isn't this...the same story coming from every organisation, whether they're a large agency or, you know, an in-house comms team or something along those lines. For me, from the organisations that I'm hearing from who say, this is absolutely, as I said, starting at the top, being driven down, it's the responsibility of senior leaders, HR, maybe a dedicated D&I person or D&I committee, but the idea is that at all levels, people are taking responsibility for D&I in whatever form. And, you know, it's not just unconscious bias training, it's training, it's workshops, it's blended learning, people coming in, doing stuff digitally, but it's a combination and it is about getting everybody on board, so non-marginalised employees...so that people don't feel that, you know, either it's been forced on them or, you know, it's just not what they want to do. I think from the feedback that I'm getting about, you know, companies trying to get everybody involved, I'm starting to hear positive things around outcomes that are happening. So, for me, 100% driven from the top and across all levels.

Avril 12:37

Katrina, what's your take on that, and particularly this idea that, you know, diversity is seen as the hot potato and, sort of, the thing that everybody wants to sort out, rather than that there's a positive potential?

Katrina 12:46

It was the one moment I was disappointed that we weren't recording video because we were all nodding so very vociferously. I do very much think that's an excellent analogy. It does feel like people are passing it around and no one wants to deal with it. But I feel like it's a reflection of a larger issue where the fear of offence takes over the fear of being misunderstood. So a lot of the meetings I sit on and a lot of the conversations I'm party to... there's a lot of speculation about whether someone will be offended, or how to word something so that a particular group won't be offended. Whereas my take on it is be honest, be true, be intentional, say what you're going to say and trust that you're dealing with a set of adults who if you make a misstep in your execution, they won't ignore the fact there is good intention in the task itself and I think that's what happening with D&I.

And I also think that it's not a recipe. We're not doing diversity. Diversity and inclusion is becoming part of an overarching ethos. I think it lies with HR and the clue is in the name. The human resource of a company is where the investment in humans from diverse backgrounds starts. It should also be part of a culture. It shouldn't be about HR ramming brown folks down the throats of unsuspecting line managers and department heads or CEOs. HR should drive and support an existing culture and way of doing things that assumes the inclusion and engagement of black, brown and yellow folks. And if it doesn't, why not?

Avril 14:20

So, without over-labouring the point, I'm going to ask this - does HR have enough power to do exactly do what they need to do? I know people are listening, but I can see all the guy's heads nodding as well. So, I'm going to go back to Melissa first because I know that Melissa deals with HR every day, being Taylor Bennett.

Melissa 14:38

Again, it varies and my thing about HR is the same sentiment about D&I professionals, I feel like there's sometimes a lot of bureaucracy within an organisation and red tape and trying to do your job with one hand tied behind your back. And this is why, going back to the first question just before, which is why I was saying I feel it needs to be driven from the top for HR or a D&I manager or expert to feel empowered, motivated and supported to carry out the things that they actually want to do. But it is mixed, there isn't this every agency or every organisation I talk to it's the same story, it's mixed. But the ones that are working best are when lots of people are involved and particularly at the top. I can't keep going back to being driven from the top down.

Avril 15:34

And Katrina what are you finding from the in-house environment?

Katrina 15:37

One of the things I think of the role of internal communicators is perhaps understanding what your limitations are. Which is again something that we don't talk about often enough. I think that, in order to drive an agenda that meets a business imperative there needs to be a culture shift, and there needs to be a culture shift that starts with individual paradigm shifts. And I think we need to manage our expectations about whether or not Joseph who was 65 and started in comms when we could still smoke indoors, and it was okay to call women 'love' and 'bab' in meetings... I think we need to understand that we're not going to shift his dominant paradigm, and we simply need to make it unacceptable for certain things to happen while leaving the leeway for us to understand that in some ways, there's one generation that we have to say 'do your best'. And there's another generation that we have to have to hold to greater account. And then there's the generation that we need to do reverse mentoring with and get them to drive us. But I think one of the things we don't talk about enough is that sometimes you just have to click / tick that corporate social responsibility box and accept that... I mean, 65 years ago my former in-laws' marriage was illegal, that's within our lifetime. 55 years ago, small black children were used as fodder for circuses in I believe it was Belgium. That was within living memory. So, if you want to talk about organisational change for someone, somewhere that people go between nine and five between Monday and Friday and then they have lives outside of that; if they're not living it and breathing as a personal mantra, manage your expectations about how much you're going to change someone's mindset within that timeframe. Of course, go for the stars, but manage your

expectations in terms of what you will be able to accomplish. Things like paradigm shifts take generations.

Avril 17:34

Yeah, I mean, and also because we're talking about one far-reaching wide industry but one industry in a huge societal challenge we're now facing. And getting back to the industry part of it, I mean Sara, you know we talk about clients and what role do clients have. I actually think that some clients are ahead of us in the D&I space and are actually starting to ask for diverse teams on pitch tenders. But others, we know, maybe aren't so I don't know what you're hearing from clients on this perspective or what you think our role is with clients around DNI?

Sara 18:01

I think it's a good point. I think we are seeing a shift and what is being asked for, in the agencies that they are looking for and sometimes you will see that in terms of a sustainability cause. Sometimes you'll see that in a D&I clause. I know, certainly recently, the Blueprint Ally status has been an important point for us when we've been going to pitch for new clients, and in their discussions with us about coming on board that has been something that's been brought up. So, I think that that trend is definitely going to continue, and we have a responsibility to make sure that we can respond to that positively and say "right, here very clearly here are the five things we are doing but also what we expect of you". And in some industries that is going to be harder than in others. And then in more consumer-focused ones I think it may be a little bit easier.

My industries have always been very male-dominated, very white male-dominated, it was construction built-environment, energy... But that doesn't mean they're incapable of change and there's a lot of good things happening, but progress is maybe a little bit slower. And that's where I see our responsibility to come in and educate them, along with us and tell them what we're doing and why we're doing it and take them on that journey with us and just say, "right this is status we have, this is what it means... It means that we have zero tolerance, this is how we approach jobs, this is how we approach clients. We expect for you to reciprocate that behaviour as well". So, if we are working with them at a very strategic level looking at all parts of the organisation, we will raise their recruitment practices. If they are, you know, a start-up company and they are going through a period of growth, we will talk to them about how they are going to structure that growth. And, actually have you considered how you're going to recruit, where you're going to recruit, how are you going to make your team diverse as it grows?

And those are questions that we have to ask. I think we do have a responsibility to be upfront about it and in certain cases we also need to take those businesses along with us. And sometimes we may drag them a little bit, and sometimes they may come willingly. But that shift is happening and it's going to continue happening and I think it's almost tied into wider shifts around sustainability as well, that whole model of what we are expecting and what we want to see in the world that we want to live in is changing. And we're starting to see that now coming through and what businesses are asking of us as agencies as well.

Avril 20:34

It's also really interesting to hear that what we're hearing from lots of people of BAME backgrounds and people of diversity [is that] we want to have an honest conversation. And that's what you're having and having it upfront.

Because also it's in the report we show people have very bad experiences led from the client-side, where if you actually have that conversation up front, this is the sort of stuff that you could address much sooner and far more directly and not have people having absolutely appalling experiences.

I'm was going to move on really. Melissa, I was going to start with you on this one. How do I identify and challenge our own unconscious bias? I know training isn't the panacea here and I think if people are aware of what's going on, in terms of their workplace and unacceptable language or behaviour, what should we do; what do you think is best practice around that?

Melissa 21:21

I mean, ultimately, I think in terms of identifying our own unconscious bias or identifying unconscious biases, it starts with leaning into the uncomfortable, you know we touched on that a little bit earlier on. I think you know we all have biases whether they're unconscious or conscious about the people around us because of the way we're raised or educated or struggles that we may have faced, and that informs how we then view and interact and treat people at work. And it's really challenging, you know, to sort of think about how you mitigate that because you need a particular level of self-awareness that not everybody has. I don't know, I think if we can start by acknowledging and, you know, understanding why we react or think in a certain way or have a particular judgement, then we can take steps to sort of challenge ourselves in a healthy way. But that for me is the first step to sort of lean into that uncomfortableness and just get comfortable with it

Avril 22:25

Get comfortable with the uncomfortable.

Melissa 22:27

Yeah I know it's a bit of a saying that's been said a lot but it genuinely is, you know, even when I have conversations I slightly feel uncomfortable but then I quickly get over that to think, well actually, I've got to get comfortable otherwise we're not going to progress this conversation and our thought process and our actions. So even a company says to me "what do you think of our organisation, these are our efforts what we're doing" and you sort of think... for me sometimes why are you asking me, it's really uncomfortable. As I said, it's just moving on with that very quickly.

Avril 23:04

Katrina, what do you think? That sort of ties into what you were talking about earlier as well, where you are, what's your take on this?

Katrina 23:08

The thing with unconscious bias, for me, I find it a really difficult question actually, because it's rather easy to think that because a particular minority group is having a moment - so black people are having a moment right now,

and it's easy to think that you don't have work to do yourself as a marginalised group. That isn't true. It doesn't take away from the fact that those whose bias affects the majority of people are the ones in power, but it doesn't mean that I don't have work to do myself. If you want to use a pretty ridiculous example - my unconscious bias about finishing Norwegian people isn't part of a systematic attempt to disenfranchise Norwegian people. It doesn't mean I don't have to work on it, but at the moment the unconscious bias that keeps black and brown women out of the C-suite in comms is a little bit more mission critical because it affects a larger group of people.

On the other hand, I think unconscious bias training needs to be taken with a pinch of salt and again managed expectations because what you're asking people to do is to look at themselves in the mirror naked in the sun, and perhaps not like what they see. And you're not just expecting them to adjust their bias at work because, as much as we have one persona for work and the other one for a home, we are fundamentally the same person.

So, if you have someone with ingrained biases against Chicano people from Puerto Rico, or from Native American people, you're not going to get them to fix that between 9 and 5 and then have them go back to being bigoted after 5 [pm]. So, I think it's a case of manage your expectations, push for the change, but understand that what you're asking for people who are truly committed to the process is not just for people to flip a switch; it's for them to sit with who they are and the parts of themselves that perhaps they're not proud of. And that's not a linear set of progress.

Avril 25:01

What I'm hearing from lots of, you know... what we're talking about here is that this is just paining me to say it but it's going to take time. I feel like we've been doing, God knows, more than 10 years - and Melissa as well with Taylor Bennett - we've been pushing at this door for a long time. Now people are finally talking about it and saying it's of value, which they weren't before, but now it's how do we make action happen, and they say it's not just changing a business, your workplace; it's actually fundamental change for a lot of people and I think that's, that's really tough. Sara, what do you think?

Sara 25:32

On that particularly I think there's a point at which we are sometimes in a bit of a rush to fix a problem. And with diversity and inclusion, we need a period of time to sit with that a digest it and reflect upon it personally. We need to create a space where it is ok to do that because like Katrina said like, you're holding a mirror up to people and we often view racism as this really overt thing and we think we recognise it, we think we recognise it because it's calling people certain words or whatever it is, but it isn't, it isn't. There's a lot of covert racism that happens that we don't quite identify with there's a lot of that one about and actually we need to be able to have a discussion where we can point that out, but allow that person time to just sit and go right, this was said to me, what does that mean, and have those views challenged, and then see what they do, rather than rush that they do something or demand that they do something immediately, as an industry we fix, don't we? We fix

reputations, we fix problems we manage things and that is our default approach, and I think it's a struggle for us to shift our mindset towards something that's just a bit more thoughtful and a little bit more considered before we take an action sometimes and I feel like that's what we need to do with unconscious biases create a space where we can have a discussion, allow people a time to sit with it and then come back to it and find a way to deal with it then, when people will have had time to reflect, hopefully.

Avril 27:03

Katrina, you were going to say something.

Katrina 27:05

Yeah, just to pick up on something that Sara said in terms of giving people the time to make that paradigm shift. I think one of the useful things that agencies can do in terms of driving their client's agendas is help their clients feel empowered to shift, not just regional but national conversations. I've long believed that the moral agenda for driving diversity of client's agendas is a fool's errand. I believe the business case should be made for it first. If the data isn't there, commission it. If your networks don't review who can provide the perspective of a minority group, then you need to broaden your network. Oddly enough, I believe that when the business case is made it is then easier to promote the moral case, because you can then appeal to the company's desire to take the CSR box. And increasingly, not get caught in this unfortunate tsunami of cancelled culture, nobody wants that. I mean there is no cure all, but there is a rule for agencies to play in moulding the industry's national initiative, notwithstanding the fact that you will always find a few people who are disingenuous and they're looking for clicks and likes, but in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter resurgence quite a few companies led national conversations and I think started the trend towards moulding a different kind of culture where it was more acceptable to say, we didn't do so good. We're listening and learning, we'll get back to you when we've had the chance to sit with this. If clients feel empowered through your policies and pitches, as an agency to start a conversation like that, or even continue one or add their voices to one, and then further on down the line agency clients can be key in the discussion, but their foot soldiers have to then feel autonomous and empowered to push this agenda from pitch, all the way through. I think that's a key part that agencies can play when it comes to trying to shift their, their client's agendas, or power to you if you've got, you know, some of Sara's plan to like Pick me Pick me, we're good to go. But if you have to drag them along a little bit. That's a great way to do it in my view.

Avril 29:17

It's an interesting one because I hear you and I can see the need for research to show that the disconnect between the audience and the company, or the you know... the comms agency in the mix and we're not answering. But I'm also quite now, I've just sort of having spent years talking about is like, I don't want to do business cases anymore, in terms of hiring comms because that I said it before I'll say it again, I don't need to write a business case that our white guy. So why am I writing the business case to hire a black man you know.

Melissa 29:41

Avril, I was just discussing the other day as well that just suddenly there are all these reports about how you know diversity and how all the protected characteristics are good for business, particularly gender and ethnicity, and I agree with you. Why, why should we be writing a business case to hire a disabled person or a woman or whatever it is, it should a hundred per cent be about trying to find the right person for the job.

Katrina 30:07

I suppose I still have just a teeny bit of faith, that if you can't, it wasn't it Maya Angelou said that you can't legislate love but you can legislate fairness. I'm only asking that our industry legislators a bit of fairness, you can't do that if you don't show people that they're losing money by cutting people out this throws into very sharp relief the issue of whose job it is to drive the agenda and why is it always our job to keep proving? And where does the burden of proof lie? Um, there is a now deceased Trinidadian playwright who said, we have not crossed a mess we have all crossed and some we have to carry. The question is whose job is it to carry? I don't I don't mind carrying a few because they've fallen along the wayside but why is the burden of proof constantly on the minority group to prove that they have a right to be there. One of the reasons why I respect one of my former directors so much is because I know for a fact that my praise and my reprimand had absolutely everything to do with my work, and nothing to do with the fact that I was black. I would love in some far-off utopia, to have someone be fired not because the size of their curls offends the white manager, not because there are sick days or thoughts to not to be genuine all of these are anecdotal, you know, evidence that we know people have to face I would like them to be fired because they're crap and only because they're crap. Not for any other reason that keeps people awake at night, the ones who go through the recruitment process, and then wonder is it me?

Avril 31:43

That'll be the highest summit of diversity inclusion to be sacked because you're just crap. Until we get to that point, why don't you start from... We've all got a right to be there now make the business case for why I can't be part of this team.

Katrina 31:55

Ahh...

Avril 31:56

That's a better way as well, and just thinking not that big one because we know recruitment, recruitment, retention, progression, rewarding, influence these are the things that actually make the difference in the long run in terms of keeping people from diverse backgrounds in businesses, and I've just thought we'll start with Melissa because obviously you've got the ear of a lot of your alumni and young people who are out there doing at the moment and I thought I'd ask Sara what her take is from a disability background and really

how that how that plays out in your experience. So, Melissa what are your thoughts on that?

Melissa 32:25

We have got lots of people that have been through the foundation and they are in, you know, good positions now and I think I was saying to you before I really want to shout about them a little bit more and share you know where they are now and what they're doing. But I think, you know, for people to for the industry to retain them rather and progress them they businesses really need to look at creating environments where individuals can thrive and feel valued and motivated and, and ultimately invested in that's what will keep them, and going back to something, Katrina said, you know, that's all about the quality of their work and people are doing good work, reward them, and acknowledge them, and celebrate that. I was rereading the racing PR report of the weekend and I remember reading something about an individual who had consistently done good work, but they were not able to be put in front of the client because the client just wasn't kind of accepting that and I remember the bosses said, we've looked over your work it's absolutely fine, but basically every time we have a meeting with the client, it's got to be us in the room and they said they left because their employer did not have their back.

Avril 33:41

Now, Sara what are your thoughts on that?

Sara 33:42

One of the things that comes up quite a lot as I think some employers are naive as to the impact, sometimes so for example I, I've been dealing with a lot of fatigue issues I had COVID at the start of April, I was, and I've had fatigue, right through since I recovered and that gave me a real insight into some of my friends who have ME/CFS, and they're kind of day-to-day life and it was quite eye opening. Sometimes when we hire particularly in disability, we put the same pressures sometimes which I don't think are right anyway because I find them quite old school on achieving and, and what that should look like. And actually that, because it's so rigid so we haven't had a culture of flexibility but for example if someone has a limiting illness and actually what they can do is work from home three days a week, they can walk from the bed on the laptop and actually the quality of the work is perfect, and they can do it and absolutely fine. We still don't value that in PR and we still think they have to be in the office from nine to half five and because of that, they have more sick days and then we say, well I hired a disabled person, and they were off all the time. And you end up in this cycle that just is not productive so I think we have to revisit better practices and COVID is showing the behind of that and now I think it's gonna be very hard for any employer to take flexible working away from people, touching on the intersectionality of it we need to have more of an awareness of that as well because, you know, when I first came into PR, I don't have a degree, I come from a council house background, and I worked in agencies in the southeast, and it was so posh, so posh! And I just felt out of place you know? I just didn't fit in with them and I couldn't relate to any of the economic/growing up experiences. So, we have a really big problem with that as well in terms of getting people to stay and if you

have this culture where it's very middle class and you can afford to go out and do all these expensive team things or whatever it is, we have to remember that not everyone in our team is going to be able to do that and people may not want to go for beer o'clock, and we have to rethink our approach to the people that we have in our organisations, I've come across those people we are a portion district and it is uncomfortable to be in that environment sometimes when you, you don't know the etiquette, I think, and that has a big impact on people staying in our industry. I worry that there is a little bit of white saviourism going on and that we hire juniors, and that I've seen quite a few larger organisations they hire junior people, and it's almost the token. Yeah, we brought in the black and Asian and mixed-race people and then, but they never seem to go anywhere, and I don't know if there's a little bit of that in it? And I know that sounds like a terrible thing to say but what I've seen recently, has really disappointed me. I think it's contributed to why we're not seeing senior members. And, you know, black and Asian mixed race.

Avril 36:46

You've raised a lot and I mean a lot there and exactly that... it's not a headcount job, let's just go out and hire a few juniors and tick the box and look our numbers look so much better now. Because, you know, that's not real diversity and inclusion and that is not going to change our industry and I, and I also hear you on the free school Miss Meals kid you know that white middle class monoculture that you come into and find yourself having to navigate and the use of language you know when you're recruiting people like ours people who hit the ground running and it'd be quite ironic actually if COVID is the game changer in terms of flexible working and picking up people in a different way, you know, I think we should start stop using some of those, you know, those set terms which basic say we just want more of the same, and Katrina I can see you gesticulating wildly on it. What are your thoughts on it?

Katrina 37:33

Recruitment has got a lot to answer for most aspects of the recruitment rat race are designed to keep people out, rather than in, I felt a degree of kinship there because Sara and I could not be more different in background or all the rest of it, but our common goal is the same. Stop, hiring the same people, and have greater respect for people, as an entire entity and not for the box ticking.

Avril 38:03

Bosses tend to hire people like them, and it's just a cycle that just keeps going round around and if that was the one before last the state of the profession survey found that actually we had an incredibly high level of people that came from fee paying schools and I thought, oh, that must be the old school but then when we looked at the data, yes it was the elders of the industry, but it was also the incomers as the youngest level. So, these people are just hiring in their own image and if we keep doing that, we won't break this monoculture down we won't reflect the society we're trying to reach, and the audiences we're claiming that we have expertise in, if we just keep repeating the same quite frankly sins of recruitment so it's not going to change. One thing I was going to ask about which sort of relates to this is a lot of people are asking

you know what should they be doing and Katrina I'm going to start with you on this one, you know, and again I've said this before yeah I'm not sure it's BAME people's jobs to answer this question, but I think we've got, you know, you guys have had the most experience of seeing it but what should someone who is non-BAME be doing to help drive this change?

Katrina 38:58

I love this question, because it speaks to a desire to create and see change. Um, I've spoken already about the fact that you're not going to shift certain people's dominant paradigms overnight. And you can create or as you know what has been said earlier, you can legislate fairness, even though if even if you can't legislate love or kindness. But I think, active listening is so key because it goes hand in hand with creating those structures. Yes, you can make it unacceptable to say certain things and meet certain references, but you also have to leave the door for communication open for misunderstanding. And for clarification that's the only way a culture changes. I was reading a bit of research that says that black and minority ethnic police officers were either transferred or fired at a higher rate than their white counterparts, not because they were worse at their jobs, but because there was a fear of offending by having that kind of down the pub conversation, which could clarify so many things, but because those conversations were not had as the kind of grey area glue that kept the communication wheel together a lot of them went through formal disciplinary processes, where a simple conversation, might have might have saved things, be aware of what you can't accomplish, there are some scenarios and this is just an example in which a 35 year old second generation Nigerian comms professional is simply not going to bring her whole self to an organisation, because no matter how inclusive and understanding the place is, there's no one with, with whom she shares a cultural background or a certain set of references in her language or in her dialect, and that extends to her contribution to pitches to campaigns. The watercooler chitchat how she takes her tea, does she even drink tea? Sometimes the kindest thing you can do, instead of being all up in her business of what she's doing this weekend... leave her be to retreat to the spaces and places that she can be her authentic self to recharge and return the next day. If you're genuinely interested in something unique to her culture, ask her about it, but don't pepper her with questions like she's a monkey in a zoo, or attached to some sort of lie detector test. Sometimes, the best thing you can do is acknowledge that you don't know, and that there's a history of reasons why there's a deep degree of scepticism from minority ethnic staff members, not just of management, but of structures of government structures of governance structures of immigration although there's a deep degree of scepticism and justifiably so sometimes the best thing you can do is acknowledge that they're going to take their time to trust you. And if they choose not to, it ain't personal.

Avril 41:43

There's a lot there. Melissa what's your take on it for people listening to this hopefully who aren't BAME because it's not just BAME people's jobs and people from diverse backgrounds job to sort this out.

Melissa 41:52

That's a tricky one for me.

Avril 41:55

No, I get that I mean for me I think even, which does feedback to Katrina's is have the conversation just talk to people be open, I think the fear factor in some of this is holding us back. And I think just acknowledging that we haven't all got the same background, we might do different things at the weekend, that you can't understand an individual, you know, because we're not all cookie cutters is half of the time, but at least feeling now that maybe you know it's worth asking somebody about what they think about things or you know what their background is in a positive way, you know?

Melissa 42:25

I mean, definitely all of the things that you just said, and just being open, and whether it's listening... well listening in particular, it is a key thing.

Avril 42:33

I think it's the nature of this challenge, it's got to be constantly evolving as diversity evolves and I think that there aren't simple answers and you said that in the beginning, didn't we, you know, it's not a tick box is not something that is going to be a hot topic for now.

Melissa 42:44

And it really is multifaceted of everything, and there are lots of forums and panels and discussions around, you know best practice and just the right things to do, but actually I think a lot of this is down... It starts with data, understanding your organisation the people you work with, and then coming up with your idea about all your suggestions. Your initiatives your programmes or whatever it is about what to do but this, the whole thing is very multifaceted.

Avril 43:15

Melissa, based on what you just said I mean how do we avoid sort of tokenism? How do we remain authentic and, you know, we've just talked about how challenging it is when we're looking at your recruitment, retention, the wider change – how do we how do we stay true to ourselves and make it an honest?

Melissa 43:32

So for me, I think, building on what I just said is taking time to work out the right thing for your business, for your organisation, you know not everyone will have the resources like you know people wise or money wise to make changes and do certain things, and I feel that as I said there needs to be layers in everything that people do so, we talked earlier on about knee jerk reactions to some of the things that have recently happened, and I have had lots of requests to just do talks about organisation, what we do and what more could be done and requesting things like unconscious bias training and that's the only thing. And equally. people say we want to support you, we want to you know for example host the masterclass that to avoid that sort of tokenism

and that, and to be authentic. I think more thought just needs to go into everything. And one of the things that I know I'm particularly insistent on doing is weeding out organisations that are not authentic and are being tokenistic with the foundation because it does occasionally happen. And so I'm looking for more genuine partnerships and people that support us in a holistic way across all of the things that we do.

Avril 44:47

And I'm thinking about a young person today, like I say, we had some really positive feedback in the report as well about what a great industry, it is. And we've had you know with our really good positive stories as well what's going on, but I wondered if you guys were talking to a young person today who came from a little more diverse background, who said to you I'm thinking about going into PR. What would be your advice to them I'm going to start with Sara on this one. I can see Katrina particularly is like woah! What are you going to say to that young person in terms of where they're heading and what their choices are?

Sara 45:17

I think, finding or building a network that is right for you is important. And that may be the mentors that you source, the groups that you join the online communities that you take part in there's a lot of them about, and some of them are really amazing. And I think if you are going to start a career in PR that network is important and the people that have your back, find the people that have your back. So, there are some amazing people doing wonderful things across diversity and inclusion in this industry at the moment. And I think as we develop, we're going to see that more and more so if you're coming into this industry, seek those people out because those you know at from a very, you know, early stage that those people are going to have your back, and most people aren't going to be there as you progress through and get you pointed in the direction you need to be pointed down for training or support or her mentorship or investments or whatever it is that is there. Put some time into creating that network and, you know, at the start of your career and hopefully that will give you a much better experience that will lead you to stay in PR and actually allow you to be to maximise your skills mutability and to progress to where you want to progress to in this industry.

Avril 46:38

Katrina, what would you, what would you say to a young person think about PR as a career?

Katrina 42:42

I would pick up on what Sara said, and I agree with it to a point networking is incredibly important, and I'm eternally grateful for the network that has helped me to meet the women on this call, and a few others that have been part of what's really been an interesting comms journey, but I will pause by saying, networking for the sake of networking needs a bit of tweaking. There's obvious people who are leaders in our industry who by now are accustomed to being approached, and you get to the point where you can almost hear the spiel coming from the recent uni leaver who's just kind of come off a gap year

and is looking for work experience. The thing I learned is to network with people with whom you have a genuine connection, and to network with people when you want absolutely nothing from them. If you keep going to people, you create a power imbalance, where you are always the intern seeking the guidance from the mentor, where it is well documented again that through reverse mentoring and just active listening meaning in all of those buzzwords, there's a lot to be learned in the opposite direction. So, my advice would be if you must get into comms start from the position of creating networks from a human perspective. I regularly reach out to people in comms and journalism, who have never put a penny in my pocket or a morsel of food in my mouth. But one day, there will be a chance that I can capitalise on and that's a horrible word, but I can't find another one right now, there'll be one day that I can capitalise on the relationship, built up over that period of time. I think that the transactional aspect of networking, makes it sour. And people can start to tell from a mile off when your idea of networking is how soon can you put me in touch with someone who can give me paid work experience, which is entirely different from a passing article that I saw in a magazine and I pick up the phone and I say, Melissa Have you seen this photograph? It's fantastic, you know, let it happen. Don't lose your humanity in your drive to find a job, which can be hard, because when you're looking for work. That's all you can see, so I don't want to sound like a cynic, there's great joy to be found in comms and great work is being done, seek out the people who are doing the great work. And listen more than you talk. Be human first, and someone looking for a job second, and eventually the work will come.

Avril 49:18

Wise words there and so Melissa you're talking to these young people every day of the week.

Melissa 49:25

Oh yeah, I definitely echo a lot of what both Sara and Katrina have said. For me, when I'm speaking to young people I just talk about, you know how exciting the industry is that they can build a, you know an actually good, solid professional career which is equivalent to, you know, being an engineer or a doctor or a lawyer you know in their own fields you know it you can have a professional career within communications. And there are so many different sectors and disciplines that you can go into so it's just about me sharing all of that with young people and saying, to get there... One of the big things that that both Sara and Katrina have said is definitely networking hundred percent agree with Katrina about finding the right networks for you though. And then also finding you know various opportunities to build their knowledge and insight and experiences, before they make the real jump into the industry. Find out if it's right for them because actually, you know it isn't for everyone.

Katrina 50:23

My other piece of advice would be to pay attention to the Melissa's of the world who have been consistently ticking away. Pay attention to the people who are not just trending because the hashtag is on the right-hand column of Twitter, pay attention to the people who are consistent in both in their intention and their execution. Don't be dazzled by the people who promise you things

that does that don't seem as if they can be accomplished reasonably, pay attention to people like Sara, who will push back on a male pale and stale list of recruits and ask for people whose name perhaps is Kwame and not just Charles. Pay attention to the people who quietly do the work behind the scenes, whether there is an uptick in the national conversation, or not because fundamentally, those are the people who are changing the industry from the inside out, and they're changing it in ways that will last.

Melissa 51:21

Well, well I really think that's the best place to end this conversation.

Avril 51:24

And I think we've had a fantastic conversation, I just want to thank you all for being honest, open, putting your true self. I mean, I always think these conversations are best if you can just say as it is, and I think you, you guys have really given some fantastic insights and some guidance today and I think anybody listening to this would have learned a lot from listening to you so just thank you for your time and your honesty.

Iain 26:47

Thanks for listening to our CIPR Engage podcast, doing diversity differently. We'd love to hear your thoughts on what you've heard, and you can hashtag us with Engage CIPR, or engage podcast to let us know. We'll be back with another episode of CIPR Engage next quarter and if there's a topic that you'd be keen to hear about then email us at training@cipr.co.uk