

OUR INSIGHTS

Practical advice on common business challenges
direct from our International team of business experts

INSIGHTS, LEADERSHIP, LUCY JOHNSON, TALENT

#BreakTheBias



How to #BreakTheBias

I grew up thinking everyone was equal. As I looked around we had a female prime minister, the Queen as Head of State, a formidable head mistress and my mum went to work. My brother and I were in my mind treated equally – although with hindsight my ironing chore should have been occasionally swapped with his chore of mowing the lawn! I believed that anything was possible as I headed off as the first (male or female) in my family to university.

University and then 10 years in banking and my perspective of equality didn't change. In every role I could see women next to and more senior than me. In hindsight I was a little naïve – female Directors were rare and far outnumbered by men.

That said my career progressed with me becoming an MD by the time I was 30 in part because of females that came before me. We all know the phrase 'you can't be what you can't see' – I agree that visible role models who carry similar characteristics to you are important. However some of my best role models and sponsors looked very different and yet their impact was profound.

1. Role models come in all shapes, sizes, colour and gender.

Amer Sajed (former Barclaycard CEO) was the best role model who actively sponsored me to take on bigger and more challenging roles. Critically, he did so whilst embracing and encouraging my personality. As a first generation Pakistani in the US I suspect he had been a trail blazer himself. Amer Sajed has a track record of elevating people and giving them opportunities, through the years I saw him do this with the broadest spectrum of individuals, he is a superstar. Amer wasn't the only one who supported my career – there were others – and I thank them too.

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10 years into work, stuff changed. I remember it – I was now much more senior, and I felt uncomfortable. I was surrounded by people who lived a life that was different to mine – one where you socialised on the golf course, brought your wife over for dinner and talked about where your kids went to school. Hierarchy and job titles were status symbols, smoothness and networking was king. There were some women, but aside from their gender they embodied the attributes I described above.

In short – I had lost my role models and I was no longer fitting in.

2. Recognise when it is you that needs to change.

I say this because my development as a person and leader was at this point the biggest stumbling block to career success and happiness. I had progressed so quickly I needed to mature and reflect on how I operated.

I want to be open about the subject of development. We shouldn't be ashamed that we are all on a journey. At this point my biggest strengths were being over played in the wrong settings, I was not thinking about the politics of a situation and frankly was being a bit of a pain!

It took me time and the benefit of hindsight to be fully open to this reality and it has made me a better leader, coach and ally.

3. If needed vote with your feet.

In the end I found that a change of company (and industry) was the best move for me. Hastings Direct and my bosses there (Gary Hoffman and Toby van der Meer) gave me space and support to be the best leader I could be. I received an offer of a promotion to Exco whilst on maternity leave – such a powerful sign for others in the company.

I remained a relatively rare female senior executive in male dominated companies, but the difference was that I fitted in. My bosses embraced who I was and I could be an authentic role model and ally for other women.

On International Women's Day 2022 we are trying to #BreakTheBias and so if you feel as though you don't quite fit in, then whatever your colour, gender, preference or characteristics remember –

Role models come in all shapes, sizes, colour and gender

Recognise when it is you that needs to change

If needed vote with your feet

And if you are sat today in a leadership position please check in on your inclusivity levels. A team of diverse individuals will inevitably include several who are very different to yourself. In that scenario you need to work hard to understand their perspective and values, ensuring everyone feels included.

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I often hear that everyone “means well” and “nothing is done intentionally”, but the little things do add up over time and if somebody feels as though they have to modify their interests, personality, values or behaviours in order to fit in then there is more to be done to **#BreakTheBias**.