

Exploring the power of parity

Barry Quirk

The MJ

05 October 2016

As glass ceilings are being shattered in the US (at least for presidential candidates), it is time that we considered our own. The public sector has 5.3 million workers; of these, 3.6 million are women. However, not enough women occupy top public sector roles. Achieving parity is powerful to the women involved and the organisations they serve.

Despite the proliferation of equality and diversity policies in major public sector employers and the passage of supportive employment legislation over the past 40 years, the UK still has a significant gender pay gap of almost 20%.

In Lewisham LBC we have near parity of gender among our senior management levels - which are comprised of 56% women. And at our top level, three of our four executive directors are women. As a result, we have been subject to a full-blown research study by the Institute of Employment Studies (IES).

IES found Lewisham LBC to have a values-based, culture-driven and long-run pragmatic approach to equalities, diversity and inclusion in its management. They saw this as being at the heart of the progress we have made.

Senior political leaders and managers set the example. They signal its importance and monitor its achievement. And they are supported by range of people management policies that reinforce the values - particularly in terms of talent management and development.

The IES study discovered the deep roots of equalities work in Lewisham. From the 1970s the council has had the benefit of leading women councillors who championed progressive workforce equality. And in the late 1970s the then Labour leader, Andy Hawkins, was responsible for Lewisham having local government's first women's equality and race relations committees.

Culture cannot be wished into existence. It is built through consistent conduct of both political and management leaders. Progressive policies mean nothing if conduct does not nurture workforce equality.

The nature of Lewisham's communities (and of our broader labour market context across London) is inextricably bound up with our equalities, diversity and inclusive approach. We can only deliver good public services and conduct important public responsibilities if those who have management roles authentically reflect the communities they serve.

This issues lies at the centre of whether the public have trust in the public servants who work for them.

This consistent focus on achieving a diverse and inclusive management workforce has required us to hire, grow and develop our own talent over the years.

One way we have done this is by ensuring that we attract and appoint women into senior management positions.

For the past 15 years, women have consistently represented over 50% of applicants and appointments. And at senior management levels, the ratio of appointments made to women actually exceeds the ratio of applications made by women.

Another is to focus on developing talent. Almost half of our senior management roles have been filled internally. As a result, the council has consistently had more women among its senior management group than other councils.

This has been to the benefit of local government as well as to the wider public sector. Three of Lewisham's directors have moved to be chief executives in other councils. A further three went to work as director generals or national directors in the senior civil service.

In Lewisham, the average pay for women has exceeded that of men for the past five years. The borough currently has a gender pay differential: for every £100 paid to women, £85 is paid to its male staff.

To ensure our pay for senior staff is properly considered, Sir Steve Bullock, Lewisham's directly-elected mayor, appointed an independent pay panel to oversee senior pay and to review, among other things, the impact on changes to women managers.

I-According to the IES study, our senior women thought the following factors were the most important:

I-Workforce planning takes a 10-year view and puts practical measures in place so as to start building it now.

I-Development and promotion opportunities were key to their own career progression and many provided personal examples from Lewisham.

I-Diversity is genuinely important and integral to the culture of the council, reinforced by the long-serving leadership over many years.

I-Training and career development policies were regarded as the most important contributor. Participants were strongly against gender-specific development but felt career planning and support could be improved.

Policies such as mixed recruitment panels and the provision of HR statistics were seen as helpful and playing an important supporting role.

When asked to identify the issues which most made a difference, senior women quoted the following as the top three: first, the example set by the leadership at the top of the council is critical to us being a truly diverse and equal employer; second, confidence the council values equality and diversity of its employees when making decisions and third, that role models and allied mentoring programmes work.

Barry Quirk is chief executive of Lewisham LBC