



News article

What are the benefits of using role models as a tool to increase diversity in the workplace?

Sep 04 2014 [Karen Higginbottom](#)

Research has shown that a lack of role models can prove an impediment to increasing diversity in the workforce, especially for women.

This article looks at how effective role models can be in boosting the diversity of an organisation throughout its ranks, especially at the top, and whether there are any drawbacks in focusing on role models to encourage diversity.

A Catalyst report entitled "Women and Men in U.S. Corporate Leadership" in 2004 found that women aspired to be chief executive in equal proportions to men, but that women, to a much greater extent than men, ran up against barriers including exclusion from informal networks and a lack of role models. Another poll of 1,000 working women in the UK by EY identified four main barriers to career progression for today's working women. These were a lack of role models, as well as age, motherhood and qualifications/experience.

"We found that when there were no role models available ... it's a key barrier to advancing diversity," Alyson Zimmerman, senior director for Catalyst, said: "If you want to serve the market then you need to look like the market."



Karen Higginbottom

Types of diversity role models

A role model can be defined in two complementary ways, Robin Schneider, director of diversity consultancy Schneider Ross, told Compliance Complete. "The first type of role model is someone who is in a position of power and influence in an organisation who takes diversity and inclusion seriously as a business issue. In other words, 'walks the talk' in terms of his or her own behaviours and holds other senior leaders to account for their progress." This first type of role model could be at the lower levels of the organisation but a company without these sorts of inclusive leaders in the top team would never make sustained progress on diversity and inclusion, Schneider said.

The second type of role model is someone who comes from a diverse background and has risen to a senior position in the company, Schneider said. "The very fact that this person has succeeded makes them a role model. As far as this second type of role model is concerned, it's actually their absence that makes an impact. So if someone researching the company sees a top team that have very similar backgrounds, then that would certainly stand out and, in time, get picked up both internally by employees and externally by analysts, business partners and other stakeholders, not least the customers. If the board and senior leadership team is dominated by white male leaders, then others will — even unconsciously — sense that they will have to work much harder to fulfil their aspirations."

What positive messages do role models send out?

The use of role models is significant, Sandra Kerr, director of "Race for Opportunity" at Business in the Community, told Compliance Complete. "It signals that the organisation recognises the importance of diversity and they serve a diverse customer base. It's powerful when a leader demonstrates through their own behaviour that they are committed to diversity, and also when leaders are transparent and share stories about how they have got to those roles and the difficulties and challenges they have had along the way."

Role models send a symbolic message to minority groups, Professor Susan Vinnicombe, director of the International Centre for Women Leaders at Cranfield School of Management, said. "There is the symbolic significance of role models; when people look up and, if they don't see a woman, an ethnic minority or a disabled person, then they say, 'this is not an inclusive organisation'."

Role models are often unaware they are perceived as such, Zimmerman said. "I've spoken to role models and they are not conscious that they are role models. When you see them in place then it can be a powerful lever in changing perception around talent and advancement. I think it's so powerful when role models look like the market and represent different pockets of the population."

Limits to using role models

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There may, however, be drawbacks about the way role models are perceived, especially when it comes to gender, Vinnicombe said. "If you look at women in senior leadership positions, then sometimes women cannot identify with the women directors they have. What has come out in our research is that men are far more likely to cherry-pick the qualities of different role models, whereas women may only look at one role model. I don't think that's a helpful way of engaging with role models. A better way is to look around and find out what do you learn from a series of role models ... Women need to put their own unique role model together."

There may also be an element of 'female misogyny' at play in the use of role models, Vinnicombe said. "The 30 Per cent Club released a report called 'Cracking the Code' which revealed that social support networks at work were the number one way of getting ahead, whereas for women that doesn't feature. Women need to learn to be more collegiate."

Many FTSE100 organisations do not recognise the importance of role models in the diversity agenda, Vinnicombe said. "Organisations run sessions on role models but we've not learnt about the effectiveness of role models in promoting diversity."

The need for a broader diversity programme

Ruth Sealy, lecturer in organisational psychology at City University, London, said, however, that it was dangerous to rely solely on role models to boost diversity in an organisation. "The danger of using role models as a 'fix' is that a few senior women might get rolled out and pushed forward for everything. This often happens without too much thought about whether the senior woman is indeed considered a role model for those women further down the organisation, or the impact on the individual women to be continually thrown in the spotlight." She argued that tackling diversity issues should never be left to the few individual role models. "They need to be part of a bigger programme where the requirement is acknowledged, the task defined and the targets known. All this needs to be led by the executive."

Case study: Lloyds Bank

Lloyds Bank launched its role model programme, known as "[Footprints in the Snow](#)", in 2012. This was in response to its own internal gender research which revealed the importance of role models in supporting the development of women. The programme started from the top and involved Alison Brittain, group director for the bank's retail division, and other female non-executive directors having sessions with women two bands below them and sharing their career journey with others.

Fiona Cannon, group director, diversity and inclusion for Lloyds Bank, said: "It's very powerful when you can hear from others that have progressed in the organisation, and also these female role models can help to bust some of the myths that exist. For example, female colleagues can self-select themselves out of roles and not apply as they fear they cannot combine work with family life. They can hear from role models that these two issues can be compatible."

The programme has been cascaded down the organisation and women who have been identified as high-performing individuals are selected as role models and then hold sessions for the women two bands below them, Cannon said. The programme was extended in June 2013 to include sessions for ethnic minorities, disabled colleagues and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) colleagues, Cannon said. "When we talked to colleagues within those groups, the need for role models on one level was even more needed. In our sessions, we're heard from gay men and female colleagues from our ethnic minority network and it's incredibly powerful to hear about their experiences." The programme is publicised through Lloyd's intranet, known as Interchange.

Cannon said the programme was part of Lloyds' drive to ensure it was an inclusive organisation. "We've set ourselves to increase the number of women into senior management positions and increase the engagement of our disabled, ethnic minority and LGBT colleagues and we're working towards those goals. We need a whole range of activities in place to support that achievement and having visible role models is one of those activities. It's also about making sure that systems and processes are supporting what we try and achieve in terms of how we recruit and develop talent, and making sure line managers have the skills and capability to manage diverse talent."

• **Karen Higginbottom** is a freelance journalist who writes on employment issues for *The Guardian* and *People Management* magazine. She has written on a diverse range of topics, from transsexuals in the workplace to bullying bosses.

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