

**EQUALITY  
GROUP**

# Micropositives: The little things that do a lot

## White paper

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# Using Micropositives to Promote a Diverse, Inclusive and Productive Workplace

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Businesses have become increasingly aware of microaggressions: small, seemingly unimportant behaviours that can nonetheless have detrimental effects on workplaces and the people who work there. Research has linked experiences of microaggressions to a number of problems including lower self-esteem, more stress, and more depression (Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014; Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010; Torres & Taknint, 2015).

Some estimates put the cost of microaggressions to productivity in the billions (Gates, 2015). Small negatives can indeed have large effects. However, the reverse is also true. Research has also uncovered a number of small things that can have similarly large and positive effects on your business and your employees.

The other challenge with inclusion and diversity in the workplace is that many of the changes take a long time and are hard to achieve. Getting a more representative leadership team in place can take years, not months to achieve. However, there are also easier and quicker changes you can make that have a significant impact. We have termed these “micropositives”.

In a year when almost every team has moved to a remote working arrangement to cope with COVID-19, where productivity can be further challenged (Allen, Golden, and Shockley, 2015) and psychological and emotional health needs come to the forefront of team management, these micropositives become increasingly valuable to maintaining an inclusive culture.

This White Paper is a scientifically-grounded, up-to-date look at these Micropositives; small but powerful steps toward a more inclusive and more productive workplace.

# 1. Think Positive

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The first step in any journey is figuring out where you'd like to go. However, this may be less straightforward than it sounds. Often the same goal can be framed in two different ways (Higgins, 1998): you can focus on the things you would like to encourage (e.g., be more inclusive) or on the things you'd like to prevent (e.g., be less prejudiced). A wealth of psychological research has shown that a focus on positives (i.e., focusing on the thing you want) typically leads to better results.

Focusing on prevention, on the other hand, often makes things worse regardless of the intention behind it (Friedman & Forster, 2001; Keller, Hurst, & Uskul, 2008; Trawalter & Richeson, 2006). For example, even when individuals are actively trying to reduce their prejudice and promote egalitarian values, a focus on preventing prejudiced behaviours (rather than promoting diversity and inclusion) tends work against them and ends up increasing prejudice (Butz & Plant, 2009; West & Greenland, 2016). So, when picking goals for your organisation, be guided by the things you'd like to accomplish, not the things you'd like to avoid.

## How to think positive?

- Evaluate your D&I goals as an organisation, are they focused on the positive things you want to achieve?
- What has your communication around inclusion been? Are there ways you could make it more of a positive concept?
- How do you communicate the value of diversity and inclusion in your organisation? Are there multiple ways, beyond just a section in the Employee Handbook, that you celebrate diversity?



## 2. Forget about Colour-Blindness

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In this context, colour-blindness means the conscious decision not to acknowledge ethnic or racial differences (Correll, Park, & Allegra Smith, 2008). Even today, it continues to be a very popular way to approach ethnic diversity (and to a lesser extent, other kinds of diversity), particularly among White people (Velez et al., 2018). There's just one problem – it makes things worse. Research shows that adopting a colour-blind strategy has a number of negative effects including increasing racial bias (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004), decreasing White employees' ability to recognise racial bias when it occurs (Offermann et al., 2014), and making White people appear less friendly to ethnic minorities (Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006). This is partially because of how difficult it is to do. Pretending (or deliberately forcing yourself) not to notice someone's ethnicity takes up a lot of cognitive resources and can impair your performance on other tasks (Correll et al., 2008).

Thankfully, there is no good reason to do it. Abandoning colour-blindness and acknowledging everyone's identity reduces bias and improves the quality of interactions between members of different groups (Norton et al., 2006; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). This is one of those rare instances where the right choice is truly the easy choice.

### How to forget colour-blindness:

- Have you had a conversation about race in your organisation?
- Have you gathered the data on racial backgrounds in your organisation, set ambitious goals and communicated this to the wider team?
- Have you visibly celebrated the ethnic diversity currently in your organisation and elevated ethnically diverse role models?
- Is there the opportunity to complete inclusive culture and bias awareness training in your organisation? Contact us at Equality Group for ideas on how to do this in a scientific and sensitive way: [hello@equality.group](mailto:hello@equality.group)

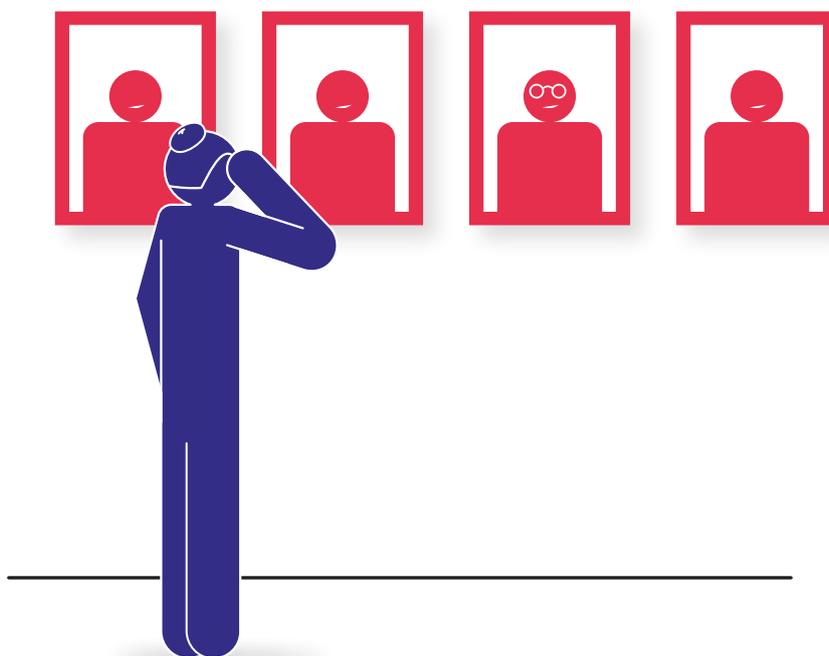


### 3. Think about your Media

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Many businesses have pictures of founders, leaders, board members or advisors on their websites. These are not trivial images. Quite the contrary, they can have a profound effect on the aspirations, perceived possibilities, and sense of belonging of those in the organisation (Rivlin & Weinstein, 1984). Unfortunately, not everyone can find people like themselves represented in these images; as they are mostly of White men (Free, 2020). Hence, underrepresented groups like women and ethnic minorities may get the subtle message that they are not expected to be leaders or the faces of the organisation (Cheryan, Ziegler, Plaut, & Meltzoff, 2014). Fortunately, this is not difficult to change. Indeed, research has found that replacing an image of a man with one of a woman immediately increased the leadership behaviours that the women in the group displayed (Latu, Mast, Lammers, & Bombari, 2013).

Websites are not the only place where we might see ourselves represented. Most workplaces have a variety of media that clients and employees encounter every day: from instructional videos, to newsletters sent out. These are also not trivial distractions, but powerful (though subtle) ways of communicating our beliefs and expectations about the people who lead us. Our own research shows that ethnic minorities are less likely to feel positively represented in such media (Equality Group, 2020).



## Think about your Media (continued)

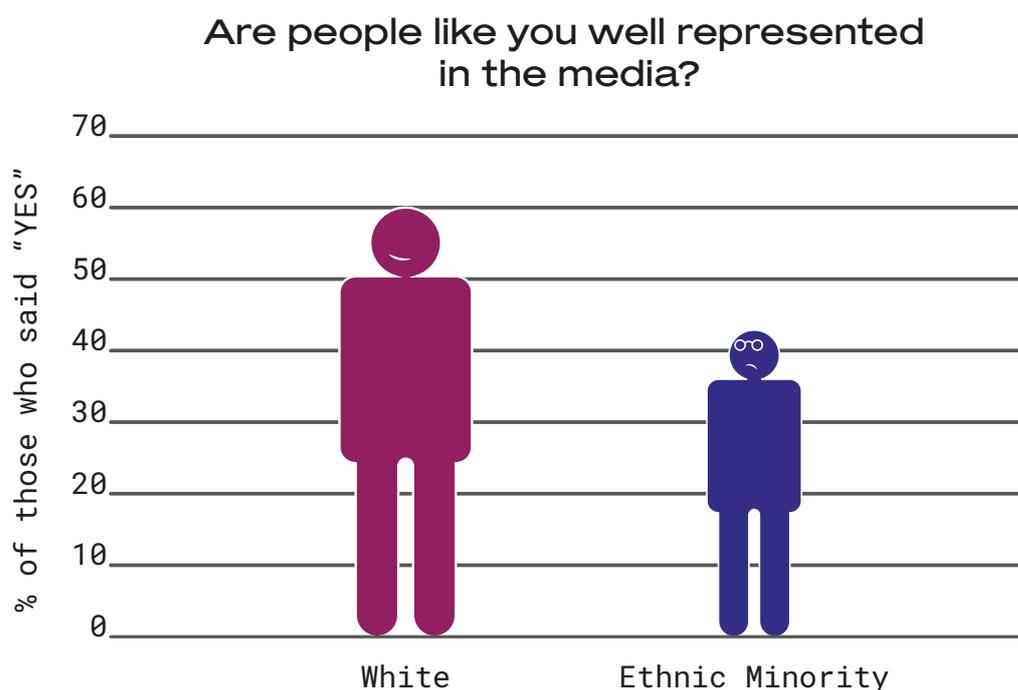
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Fortunately, research has found that positive and counter-stereotypical representations in even these seemingly trivial media can have profound effects. When women see themselves represented in reading material in ways that counter stereotypes (e.g., as scientists or people with promising careers), they perform much better on a range of tasks, especially when compared to how they perform after seeing stereotypical representations (even ones that are positive), like beauty magazines (Good, Woodzicka, & Wingfield, 2010; Luong & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2017). The same is true for ethnic minorities, who also perform better on a range of tasks after exposure to positive, counter-stereotypical representations (Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, & Stone, 2008).

So, get rid of the any stereotypical representations and make your media as representative as possible. The people in your team may hardly notice the change in the online video, but research says these subtle challenges to stereotypes will make them happier and more productive.

### How to think about your media:

- Audit all the images on all of your media: gather the data and analyse the diversity and inclusivity of your current image bank.
- If you have no images on your website currently and very little visual media, then this is a great opportunity to develop inclusive media from scratch.
- Think creatively about who in your organisation could represent inclusivity and diversity for you and try to avoid stock images.
- Acknowledge the contribution all of these people are making as brand ambassadors for you.

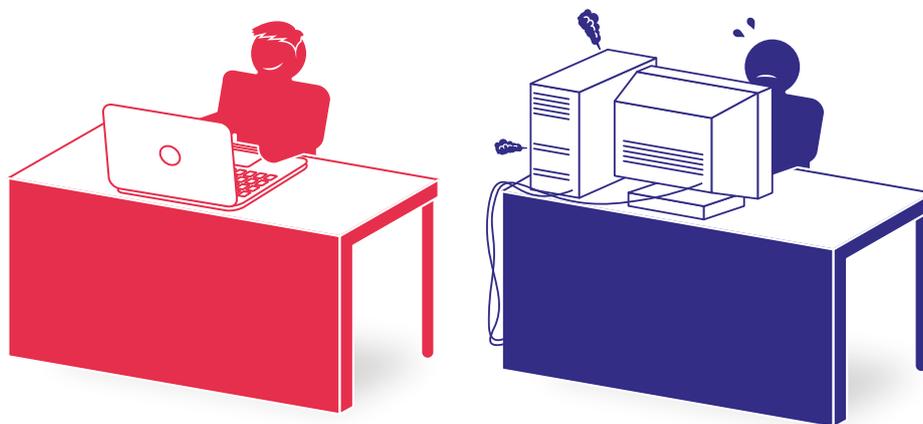


## 4. To Each the Same

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Speaking of the resources they need, it is often the case that many resources in organisations are distributed without a set of formal rules to guide them (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005). This can be anything from access to key documents, to days off for bereavement or family difficulties (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002). There is much more diversity in the workforce today than there was a few decades ago, which is very good. Unfortunately, research has also found that gender and ethnic differences between supervisors and subordinates can often result in the subordinate being under-resourced (i.e., not getting all the resources he or she needs). This can lead to worker dissatisfaction, burnout and high turnover (Luksyte & Avery, 2015). Fortunately, this is also very easy to fix. Using a standardized, transparent system of resource distribution takes the guesswork and fluctuating estimations away from managers and ensures that employees all get the same resources in the same position.

This need has only increased with the move to remote working, where there is no guarantee that everyone has the same level of equipment, use of technology tools, or document access as each other. Spending time communicating with the whole team about creating equal access and ensuring that everyone has as much support for homeworking would be time well spent. It's a simple fix that can decrease burnout, increase positive workplace behaviours, boost productivity, and decrease turnover (Luksyte & Avery, 2015).



### How to share resources fairly:

- Create formal guides to how to access all the key resources that individuals will need to effectively complete their work remotely, and in the office.
  - Share these guides widely and regularly with the whole team
- Ask for feedback and the input of the whole team to iterate any updates or improvements.
- Encourage leaders and managers to proactively share information and resources with their whole team.
  - Measure how effectively this is happening and make sure there is accountability built in to the review system.

## 5. See the Invisible

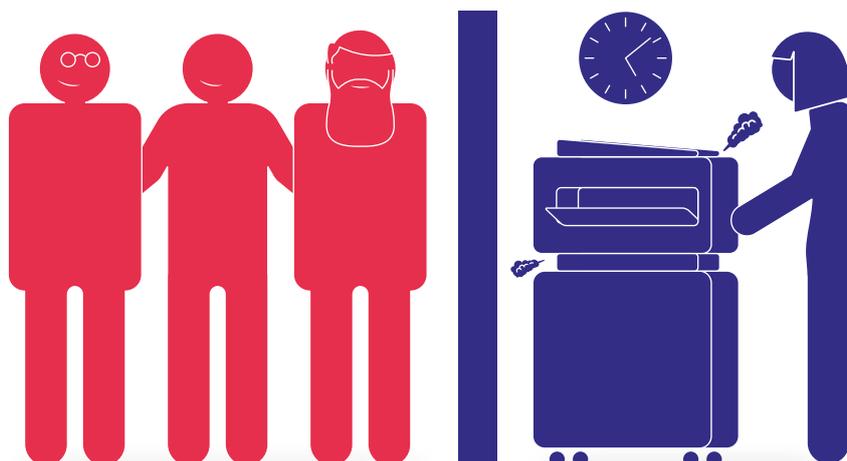
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Resources aren't the only things that get passed around informally. Every organisation has a certain amount of "invisible" work – for example scheduling team calls, organizing group catch-ups, sharing inspirational content or interesting reading material and doing all the little things that don't really show up on anybody's list of official tasks. These tasks still have to get done, but nobody gets promoted for doing them. Unfortunately, research shows that these invisible tasks are usually not distributed evenly throughout an organisation. Women tend to be given (and to volunteer for) many more of these invisible tasks than men do (Babcock, Recalde, & Vesterlund, 2017; Babcock, Recalde, Vesterlund, & Weingart, 2017; Dogan, 2019; Guarino & Borden, 2017; Mitchell & Hesli, 2013).

Recent research also reveals similar patterns for ethnic minority workers compared to White workers (C. Miller & Roksa, 2020). The over-allocation of invisible work takes away from employee's time to perform all the important, visible duties that lead to promotion and increase one's satisfaction at work. This invisible work can include but is not limited to, checking in to make sure team members are coping well in the current environment, to organising social or team catch-ups to being involved in inclusion and diversity work of the firm. Thus, it is well worth an employer's time to make this work as visible as possible. Explicitly acknowledging this work and distributing it evenly throughout an organisation makes your workplace a fairer, happier place to be.

### How to see the invisible:

- Find out what additional work people are doing that goes beyond their job specification
- Assess what you find valuable to building an inclusive culture and build in recognition and rewards to that (i.e. if you want to encourage your team to stay positive and inspired with high quality content, then recognise the people in the team who are sharing that content regularly)
- Add an inclusive culture recognition into your review system process, to ensure this work doesn't go unrecognised in the future



## 6. Get Emotional

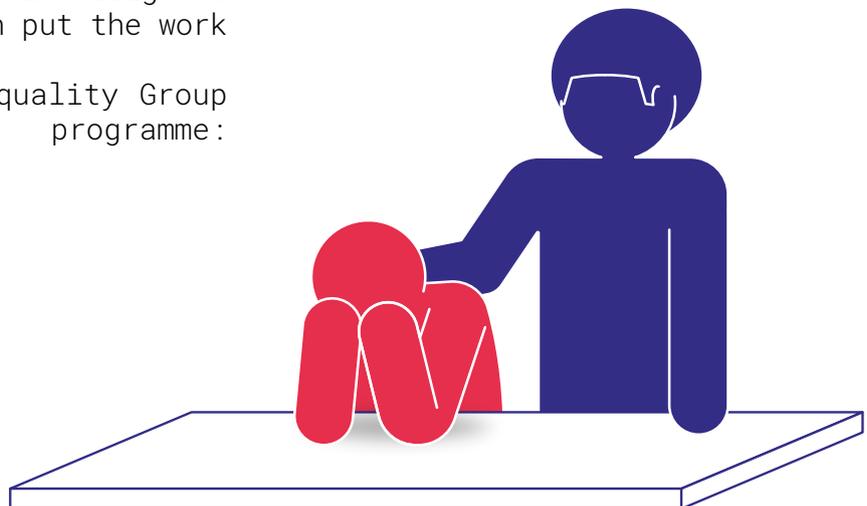
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When we think about selecting, training, and promoting the right person for a position, we often think about the technical or cognitive skills that the candidate would need. But research shows that emotional intelligence is also very important for success at work (O'Boyle Jr. et al., 2011). Emotional intelligence in managers predicts more leadership effectiveness (Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005), more behaviour that supports the goals of the organisation (Côté & Miners, 2006), and more favourable ratings from their employees (Kerr, Garvin, Heaton, & Boyle, 2006).

These findings hold true even after accounting for other important variables like age, gender, education, and cognitive abilities. Even better, emotional intelligence can be taught and developed (Brackett, Rivers, Reyes, & Salovey, 2010b). There are scientifically-supported ways of improving your ability to recognise, understand, express and label your emotions, and these have been shown to create a more positive and effective organisational climate. Dealing with challenging economic and societal times, plus remote working as team is likely to be presenting new challenges, increasing your emotional intelligence is a guaranteed way of creating a more inclusive culture and ensuring that your team stays connected through the tough times and into the good times.

### How to get emotional:

- It all starts with the individual. Become more self-aware as a leader and/or a team member.
- Recognise the emotions you feel on a daily basis and bring more awareness to why you feel those emotions.
- Find appropriate ways to share your feelings with your team and/or colleagues.
- Become aware of other people's emotions at work and show empathy whenever possible (i.e. put yourself in their shoes).
- Know your own strengths and weaknesses. If emotional intelligence is not one of them, then put the work in now.
- Consider doing the Equality Group Conscious Culture programme: [hello@equality.group](mailto:hello@equality.group)



## 7. Be Upfront about Valuing Diversity

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There are times when modesty is an important value, but this is not one of them. If you value diversity and inclusion, why not shout about it? Our own research shows that ethnic minorities are less likely to believe that their organisation takes issues of diversity and inclusion seriously rather than it being just a tokenistic exercise (Equality Group, 2020). Research also shows that a clear statement of positivity about diversity makes underrepresented groups perform better at a variety of tasks, since they are not using up cognitive resources trying to figure out where they stand (Mendoza-Denton, Shaw-Taylor, Chen, & Chang, 2009). There are other benefits as well. Even in the most well-meaning, diverse, and inclusive companies, mistakes will sometimes occur, even if by accident. And even if everything is going relatively well, sometimes ambiguous or unclear messages can cause offence. The good news is that the right environment can help everyone feel better about these instances and respond better to them.

Research has shown that the more upfront you are about your diverse and inclusive values, the more likely your employees are to see ambiguous instances in a favourable way, and the more kindly they will respond even if they think an unfortunate incident has occurred (Offermann, Basford, Graebner, Degraaf, & Jaffer, 2013). One of the most important aspects of remote working is the need for increased communication, which gives you many opportunities to come back to your values as an organisation and finding ways to promote your talented team members and good inclusive practices. There's no reason to hold it in. If you value diversity and inclusion, let people know. Your workplace will benefit from it.

### How to be upfront about valuing diversity:

- Review where you talk about inclusion and diversity across your media and your organisation.
- How visible is your support of inclusion and diversity on your website, your company materials, your social media and in your meetings.
- Develop clear messaging and narratives about the value of inclusion and diversity in your organisation to be able to share internally and externally.
- Gather your data, analyse it and share it – your team will value the transparency and accountability
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## 8. Use your words

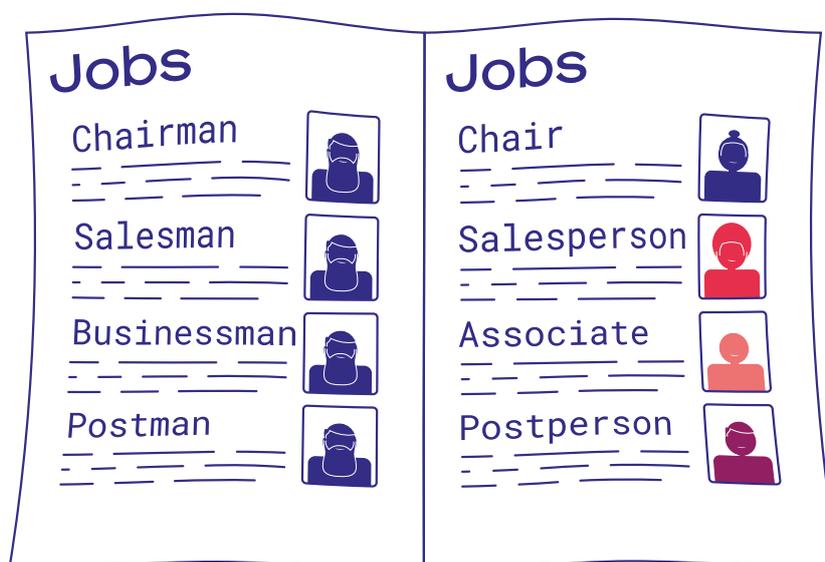
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Have you recently referred to a chairman, salesman, or businessman in your work? Perhaps next time it could be to a chair, salesperson, or businessperson? It may seem like a small change, but research shows that the use of gender-specific language significantly alters our sense of who belongs in a particular position. Women who hear male-specific language during an interview (even something as subtle as using the pronoun “he” exclusively when discussing the post), feel less belonging, less identification with the job, and less motivation to do it well (Bem & Bem, 1973; Gastil, 1990; Stout & Dasgupta, 2011).

A subtle shift to gender-inclusive language flips all those effects and creates more belonging, more identification, and more motivation. In a similar vein, research also shows that using gender-inclusive language signals more positive attitudes toward transgender and gender nonconforming individuals (Patev, Dunn, Hood, & Barber, 2019). There are many other benefits to using inclusive pronouns as well, including a reduction in stereotypes and discrimination (Sczesny, Formanowicz, & Moser, 2016). This is a very small linguistic change with very large benefits.

### How to use your words:

- Become highly aware of the gender specific language that you use.
- Encourage your team to do the same and to keep each other accountable for speaking in gender neutral terms as much as possible.
- Audit your media and materials for gender biased terminology and change it as soon as possible.
- Use gender-neutral tech tools to help with any of your media or communications, such as Textio, which helps you to remove gender-biased terms from your job postings or the free version called Gender Decoder.



## 9. Amplification

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In the last meeting you attended, or the last video conference call you were on, who ended up speaking the most? Researchers have found that in business meetings, where decisions need to be made quickly, it is men who speak more than women (Leaper, C. 2007). On top of this, despite the common misconception that women are more talkative than men, the critical influence on talkativeness is not gender, but the context and the audience (Mehl, M. R., & Pennebaker, J. W. 2003). This means that women are more likely to talk more to other women, but less if they are the minority in the room. Men are also more likely to be more talkative in a room full of men. The bottom line is that if you are a minority in the room, it is less likely that your voice will be heard. You therefore need the help of others to amplify your voice. Amplification is the practice of noticing when a minority in a group discussion makes a good point, repeating it to give greater emphasis to the point and finally crediting the person who originally made it. If this is done systematically in meetings, it can help counter inherent group and social biases that manifest themselves through who receives the most airtime, recognition and praise. President Obama's White House team credit the evolution from two-thirds men as top aides in 2009 to gender parity by 2014 in large part to the practice of amplification.

### How to amplify:

- In a meeting ask directly a person from a representative minority group their opinion.
- Do not interrupt a person from a representative minority group when they are speaking.
- Acknowledge the point that that person has made and ask follow up questions.
- When meeting in person, invite a representative from a minority group to sit closer to the front instead of at the sidelines.
- Encourage someone from a minority group to share their opinion as early in the discussion as possible, especially on virtual meetings



## 10. Is Anybody Up There?

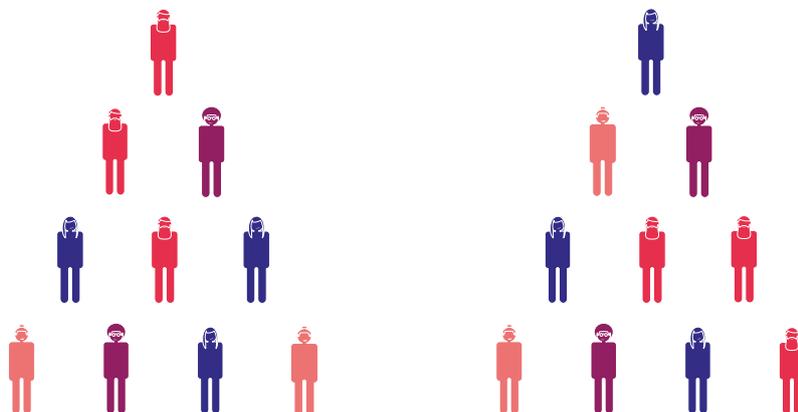
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As we've said, diversity has increased in many companies over the last few decades. Unfortunately, however, that doesn't mean that diversity has increased at all levels. Even today, women and ethnic minorities tend to be found in higher proportions at the lower levels of organisations, not the higher levels. This rarely goes unnoticed. Indeed, the diversity of a company's leadership is often used as information about the genuineness of the company's commitment to diversity and inclusion (T. Miller & del Carmen Triana, 2009).

Going further, employees within an organisation use this information to colour (pardon the pun) their interpretation of diversity-related incidents at work, an effect that applies both to women and to ethnic minorities (Jansen, Otten, & van der Zee, 2017; Lindsey, Avery, Dawson, & King, 2017). Ok, we admit it, there's nothing "micro" about ensuring that your company shows the same levels of diversity throughout, from the top to the bottom. However, it is a gift that keeps on giving long after you put it in place and forget all about it. It sets the tone for many other things that happen in your organisation, and it's a powerful way to reduce absenteeism and burnout, as well as increase productivity, retention and positivity at work.

### How to get diversity at the top:

- Review where you can be ambitious in your hiring plans for mid-level management and senior leadership.
- Put in place a strategic hiring plan and start to build diverse talent watchlists.
- Partner with firms, such as Equality Group, networks and other partners who can help increase your connection with diverse talent.
- Spend the time making yourself a business where diverse talent would want to join by following the micropositives steps and investing in inclusive policies, processes and practices.
- Debias your recruitment and hiring practices, this is absolutely essential if you want diverse talent in your organisation



Two equally diverse systems except the one on the right is more evenly structured.

## Putting it all together

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This might seem like a long list, and one that's hard to remember all at once. But the good news is that there's no need to remember them all or even apply them all at the same time. You might even find that you are doing many of them already! The important thing is that you take the steps at whatever pace you can manage. Remember, once these strategies are applied they continue to have benefits long after you stop thinking about them. Each individual strategy requires very little effort (except maybe that last one), and you don't have to do them in any particular order. So, we encourage you to give them a try. Change a portrait today. Replace your magazines tomorrow. Swap all gender-specific pronouns on your paperwork to gender inclusive ones. Keep going down through the list till you've completed them all. You'll be rewarded with a workforce that gets more done and is happier doing it, even after you've stop noticing all the small changes you put in place to make it that way.

### Micropositive Bingo

Time for a Promotion	Forget about Colour-Blindness	Think about your Media	To Each the Same
	See the Invisible	Get Emotional	
Be Upfront about Valuing Diversity	Use Your Words	Amplification	Is Anybody Up There?

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