

Gaslighter in the Midst

A toxic workplace culture invalidates your Diversity, Equity and Inclusion claim.



In today's corporate landscape, the pursuit of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) stands as a beacon for progressive organisations. Yet, there exists a troubling fragility within these endeavours. Often the stated commitment to such initiatives is overshadowed by the privilege from those that drive its pursuit. It is disheartening when self-heralded champions of DEI are better recognised for their missteps in it, than concrete actions for it.

Leaders, entrusted as custodians of a company culture, frequently overlook the presence of detrimental behaviours that breed toxic workplace environments. These behaviours, often rooted in entrenched biases and prejudices, fortify the power imbalances that stifle diverse voices, sidestep equity and render inclusion a superficial display rather than a genuine ethos.

The Gaslighter

Gaslighting is a pernicious form of psychological abuse characterised by a purposeful pattern of manipulation. This behaviour involves calculated tactics to make individuals or groups question their reality, sanity or experiences. In a business

setting, gaslighting manifests through strategies like withholding crucial information, actively redirecting or misdirecting information, purposefully obscuring important topics from view and consistently shifting blame onto others. Character assassination is a key goal, achieved through false claims, magnification of minor issues to imply incompetence and the incessant questioning of actions to cast doubt on capability. Gaslighters will agree to something in private but then actively deny the volition of it when discussed in a public round, with the clear intent to diminish confidence. They create disruptive narratives, ridicule initiatives before they gain traction, and subtly sow seeds of doubt through casual derogatory remarks about individuals or groups.

Outfitted with a Machiavellian-cloak, a gaslighter will orchestrate campaigns to systematically dismantle the reputations and resources of those targeted. This 'schemer' operation strategically seeks ways to force individuals out of the picture, deflecting attention from their own faults by projecting them onto others. They will utilise seemingly benign devices of bitching, word salads, circular conversations, ad-hominem attacks and general pettiness. The insidiousness of these persistent actions is not to be underestimated, these behaviours are often rooted in the personalities associated with malignant narcissists and sociopaths.

Behind all this lies a singular intent: triumph by discrediting, distracting, confusing and frustrating, pushing people to perpetual self-doubt.

Often portrayed as a game or trivialised by the perpetrator, this scheme operates within opaque rules, providing an unfair advantage to those exerting the illusion of control. It bolsters distorted narratives that foster environments of disunity and distrust. These tactics seldom occur in isolation, they receive tacit support or blind-eye turning from superiors and peers. While not overtly condoning such behaviour, inaction driven by self-interest contributes to its perpetuation. Furthermore, disregarding such conduct as inconsequential to one's own well-being unwittingly harms the welfare of those affected by it. Opportunists who take advantage of these situations, aligning with perpetrators to advance their own ambitions, further entrench a cycle of toxicity toward those subjected to the abuse.

The Management

It is not just the complicity of an ineffectual management approach that fails to stamp-out toxic environments, but the schizophrenic tolerance towards them. One

that provides a breeding ground for such harmful behaviours to exist. Discrimination emerges when the escalation of one person's bad conduct is superseded by the ties that bind that relationship and the 'writing-up' of others is inevitable, as those relationships do not exist.

“When people show you who they are, believe them.”

Maya Angelou

Let's examine failures to resolve such problems through the lens of some notable management shortcomings. To emphasise the absence of actions that contribute to undermining efforts in the advertised environment of equity and inclusion. Missteps that pay dividends to the ongoing toxic manifestation that ultimately continues to suppress diverse voices.

Welcome to your first days: **"I've told them, they have to make this work!"**

There's no charm in the self belief a decree possesses the power to remedy everything. As if authority alone can rectify a manipulative sentiment towards work and relationships. An irony lies in this illusion, where those who believe they hold all the cards are more likely pawns in someone else's game. When a manager's self-importance belies such manoeuvring they end up participating in its fabricated reality. Perpetrators target the stroking of an ego and managers fall hard to that adulation. The genuine truth becomes obscured. Relationships are no longer forthcoming and misinterpretations are rife. This eventually renders an environment that is neither equitable nor possible to navigate.

Wishy-washy inaction: **"...the behaviour is not good, no!"**

When the mistreatment of others is treated as a charming quirk, managers subtly communicate that standards for professional conduct are mere suggestions. Insinuating that harmful behaviour will improve if everyone performs, works, or acts differently, or advising victims to 'charm' their abusers, shifts blame away from the perpetrators. This demonstrates a failure to empathetically comprehend the situation, while simultaneously contributing to its damaging impact. Furthermore, it undermines any inclination for an environment underpinned by psychological safety.

Ad-hominem attack: **"You're shit, everything you do is shit, everything has been shit since you got here!"**

While not showcasing any linguistic prowess or resonating as a profound personal attack, this highlights inappropriate conduct in a professional setting. Bad attitudes stemming from general frustrations; lousy days, dissatisfaction with results, displeased with an approach, are not uncommon in the workplace. However, personalised attacks undermine any semblance of professional accountability. This tactic is often used by those attempting to manipulate and control the narrative through intimidation. When a manager finds humour in such behaviour, they not only undermine their own responsibilities but also expose their failure to ensure an equitable and adequately safe work environment. Moreover, this contribution towards toxic attitudes reveals a manager's allegiance to that toxicity.

Escalation response: **"...this is a you and them thing."**

This display of selective amnesia amid a backlog of undeniable truths, uncovers the contrarian value of a manager. A hostile indifference, where individuals leisurely evade their responsibilities, compounds behaviours like gaslighting. Treating concerns of misconduct as unearthed whispers from a fictional narrative, stripping them of any significance, is derogatory at best, abusive at worst. It diminishes any perception of upholding company values and effectively emboldens the influence of those with ulterior motives. Managers are not in place to pilot equality as a delicate balancing act between safety and harm. Destructive behaviour must be addressed without impunity. It is imperative to conscientiously seek and consider the full scope of information in tackling these circumstances. Similar to any DEI measures, practising hubris with an obfuscated understanding will not effectively address or lead to successful solutions.

Proactive suggestions: **"...win them over."**

Shifting responsibility for proving bullying onto the target overlooks one fundamental reality – bullying is a traumatic experience. To be required to persistently report these incidents, all while trying to sustain proficiency in one's role, is an unreasonable expectation. An absence of morals is evident when individuals are encouraged to 'win over' those exhibiting behaviours resembling malignant sociopaths. When mediation is suggested as the magical solution to suppress the enduring mistreatment. It is a dereliction of management duty to expect individuals to 'charm' their way out of these situations. This further indicates inclusion is only achievable through adaptation to corrosive relationships.

Perceptive feedback?: "**...it would seem you don't feel good here!**"

Amid the dismissed concerns and victim-blaming, does this represent the pinnacle of the perceptive mind? Privileged bias intersecting with entitled bias, compounding bias.

- Diversity goes beyond token representation and superficial optics.
- Equity demands more than numerical achievements; no percentage can serve as the ultimate barometer.
- Assimilation to a singular ethos is not the epitome of inclusion.

DEI is experience, a nuanced realm of felt liberation. Managers must necessitate it through introspection and a commitment to rectify biases and ignorance in their own behaviour - especially when they pertain to wave the DEI flag. To not step aside from one's own perspective, is a simple failure to understand another perspective. This falls woefully short of adequate responsibility in understanding the needs within a DEI experience. Companies can not claim accolades of DEI if no employee reports to genuinely feeling it, nor if the fundamentals are constantly challenged by the rooted bias of the management team.

Management self-indulgence: "**It's been difficult for me!**"

This display of unparalleled lack of empathy in grasping the immense burden of being a target of destructive behaviour is a management home-goal. This is not leadership, nor a lesson in selflessness. Authentic leaders do not highlight one's own struggles in navigating the challenges of toxic conduct, nor parade their fragility as sacrificial captives. Addressing bullying and manipulative behaviour is not more challenging for the arbitrator than the victims enduring it. Managers who are devoid of properly acknowledging or addressing such issues will eventually have to grapple with the fallout of toxic environments. True leadership is exemplified by courageous actions to confront such activities, rather than succumbing to inaction to savour one's reputation or relationships.

In the end: **you didn't make it work.**

The sentiment that individuals struggling in challenging work environments bear sole responsibility for making things work is a harsh and disheartening reality that many endure. A healthy and safe workplace requires a collective effort, and it is the manager's responsibility to proactively address obstacles and individuals causing harm within it. Attributing blame to those enduring such circumstances fails on all

points to demonstrate a supportive or inclusive work culture. The primary aim of management should be to proliferate an environment where everyone can thrive. Else, inevitably these falsehoods in ethos eventually surface and employees will express their dissatisfaction by 'voting with their feet'!

Who asks for this?

It is an utterly misguided notion that conflict or bullying fortifies the health of an organisation through agitation. Nor can it be bestowed that it augments the foundational ethos or initial requirement for diversity, equity and inclusion programs. Unthinkable damage is done towards individuals in reconciling a situation where persistent grievances reverberate within a chamber of apathy, remaining unheard, unaddressed, unresolved and persistently ignored. A place where demands lie with individuals, under a reign of terror, to display substantial resilience to persist in their positions or be rewarded career progression. When repercussions for vocalising concerns disproportionately afflicts the victims, wherein the punishment for speaking up only but eclipses the accountability of any perpetrator.

True leadership emerges when leaders exemplify decency and transcend the confines of privileged bubbles. Admirable leaders do not detract from the data with repugnance because it criticises their brethren. Genuine leaders prioritise the well-being of all employees over past affiliations. And, effective leaders proactively take measures to eradicate destructive behaviours harboured in manipulative environments to not burden anyone's sense of well-being or sanity – that is sadism!

A reputable company strives to operate a healthy organisation. It seeks to stamp-out the existence of conflict and the inherent power imbalances that come with it. It employs effective people who are not overwhelmed by the responsibility of their roles in addressing such environments. It does not go about cementing the damaging cycle of gaslighting and abuse into the organisational ethos, further embedding it into the framework.

Conclusion

Championing diversity, equity and inclusion puts your organisation at odds with itself when leaders are either participating or not actively eradicating toxic activities that put it at risk. DEI is simply an unattainable goal within such a flawed playing field.

In essence, the narrative of DEI is inexorably entwined with the practice of leadership. There was a palatable chasm between aspiration and reality. It is incumbent upon those at the helm of these endeavours to transcend ideas of mere custodians to vanguards of progress. Ultimately, there is no fine line to traverse between a healthy organisation and a toxic one - it's a choice! Expectations for paradigm shifts should not come from those who are struggling to operate in such environments. This only echoes that chasm. It speaks volumes about the reluctance to confront toxic undercurrents from those who wield the power. Averting gaze from these inhospitable situations only fuels their manifestation and further breeds narcissistic conduct.

To all those affected by such behaviour, I extend my empathy and regret that adequate protection has not been provided. The existence of individuals thriving in hostile environments, operating in the shadows a company provides, shielded by old ties and ineffective management, is a screaming lamentable reality. It is an ever present reminder of the need for a more qualified approach to an organisation's leadership. Perhaps herein were some lessons.

In the eyes of others (direct feedback from within)

"Clearly there are loud people who want to stop her. Maybe that just comes with the territory. It at time feels like a bunch of people yelling, screaming and pounding at their chests on who is the top dog. When your primary counterpart will do whatever it takes to bring you down. But she rises up as much as she possibly can. When others are willing to go low, say terrible things, she keeps her head high and remains professional. For us, it means there is a chance to be better people and believe in a more positive culture no matter how high we may be in rank."

As a closing remark, 'I tried!' And to end on a very British note; "Well pardon me for not being able to flourish in such a hostile environment!"