

# Navigating the Minefield: have we become scared of EDI?



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For the charity sector, as for the wider economy, addressing Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) issues is not just a moral imperative but also a fundamental necessity for organisational growth and societal impact. Many organisations have experienced internal tensions as they have attempted to grapple with these issues. Understandably passionate colleagues across the Not-for-Profit space have often been quick to point the finger at their Senior Leadership Teams or Trustee Boards when they have felt that appropriate action is not being taken. Consequently, are some leaders now in danger of seeing EDI as a source of risk and vulnerability, rather than as a source of opportunity and resilience? How are organisations responding when things go wrong? And what are the lessons we should learn from the last few years?

In response to these questions, Society recently hosted a breakfast event, 'Navigating the Minefield: Have We Become Scared of EDI?'. We brought together a panel of four charity executives who gave honest accounts of their experiences addressing EDI issues and key learnings. We then had an open-floor discussion with our attendees, who were a mix of charity CEOs, trustees, senior executives, and diversity specialists. Our speakers were:



**Christine Kinnear**

Founder & CEO,  
With Insight Education



**Woosh Raz**

Executive Director of People,  
Culture and Inclusion,  
NCVO Education



**Rowena Estwick**

Consultant & former  
Director of DEI



**Phil Kerry**

Chief Executive Officer,  
New Horizon Youth Centre

The discussion highlighted several crucial considerations that charity leaders should be guided by when seeking to tackle diversity issues, as well as tangible strategies for doing so.

## Inclusive Recruitment

We heard from a participant who had secured her first Board position through her own personal networks and became a charity's first global majority Trustee. Her colleagues around the Board table took this as evidence that their recruitment process was inclusive, and she felt her own experience was evidence to the contrary. We then heard from another charity leader who started his first Trustee position and did not receive any training, guidance, or support in terms of understanding the composition of the Board and various non-exec roles. There was a consensus from the group that, to reap the rewards of building a truly diverse Board, new Trustees must be trained and supported in getting to grips with how a successful Board operates and works. It is also imperative to proactively and critically assess recruitment practices to ensure delivery of a diverse and broad range of candidates.

There was universal agreement that strong organisations also need to be diverse across their executive team. In this area we were able to talk a little with participants about the recommendations in our [Inclusive Recruitment Toolkit](#).

## Building Muscle Memory

For EDI efforts to be truly effective and sustainable, they must be deeply ingrained in the organisation's culture. This is achieved by building 'muscle memory', ensuring that inclusive behaviours become second nature to everyone within the organisation and that they persist even after individuals who champion them leave the organisation. This requires ongoing training, consistent reinforcement of inclusive values and integrating EDI principles into all aspects of the charity's operations. Employees need to truly emulate the values and behaviours outlined in training and this must be actively monitored and addressed when shortfalls are identified, as what is often dismissed as 'office banter' can sometimes be offensive or inappropriate language in disguise.

## Collaborative Leadership

Effective EDI initiatives require collaborative leadership. Leaders must be willing to take accountability for their mistakes and actively work to correct them. This transparency builds trust and fosters a culture of continuous improvement. Employees must be able to trust in their leadership to prioritise EDI. We heard from a range of leaders who have approached this differently; some had actively set up 'listening groups' with a direct link to the Board, others had actively embedded EDI into every policy, strategy and internal and external processes, so it is the golden thread tying everything together. Collaborative leadership in the not-for-profit sector fosters inclusive decision-making and drives impactful change in EDI initiatives and not solely relying on lived experience, whilst that input is valuable is can simultaneously be exhausting.

It is important to recognise that progress often involves setbacks and that things may get worse before they get better.



## Tangible Tactics

Implementing practical and targeted initiatives is essential for making measurable progress in EDI. Some effective tactics include:

- **Diversity Champions:** Appointing individuals dedicated to promoting diversity and inclusion within the organisation. Setting clear parameters and progress check-ins for this is vital.
- **Diverse Leadership Training Programs:** Providing training that focuses on developing diverse leadership skills and preparing individuals from diverse backgrounds for leadership roles. We heard from a charity executive that their organisation is currently on their third iteration of a year-long management training programme for global majority individuals that is proving very successful.
- **Diversity Committees:** Establishing a committee responsible for feeding back on progress of EDI initiatives, ensuring they are aligned with the organisation's goals, and monitoring progress. This committee must have open and unfiltered lines of communication with the Board to provide a current and honest view of EDI progress and where work still needs to be done.

## NFP-Specific Challenges

The Not-For-Profit (NFP) sector often faces unique challenges when it comes to addressing diversity issues. Due to the altruistic nature of their work, there can be a tendency for individuals to centre inclusive intentions over practical action. But that can lead to dangerous complacency. Issues may be more easily brushed under the rug. It is crucial for NFP organisations to recognise this risk and proactively address it by fostering a culture of humility and continuous self-assessment.



In conclusion, effectively tackling diversity issues in the charity sector requires a multifaceted approach that combines inclusive Board recruitment, ingrained behaviours, collaborative leadership, tangible strategies, and a recognition of sector-specific challenges. By building muscle memory, fostering accountability, implementing concrete initiatives within both the core organisation and the Board, and maintaining a vigilant stance against complacency, charities can create a more inclusive and equitable environment. This not only enhances the internal culture of individual organisations, but also increases the resilience and legitimacy of the sector as a whole and strengthens the impact it is having on the communities' it serves.

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