by Simon Kettleborough

In the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, socially equitable, non-judgemental, employee-scarce society in which the business of this country will be conducted in years to come, prejudices and divisions will be overturned. Won't they?

Investing
in inclusion

Many people in positions of power and influence have no difficulty in subscribing to the diversity principle. It's not a difficult argument to grasp and the logic is inescapable. In essence, it means judging and treating people on their real accomplishments, gifts, talents, words, and deeds - rather than accidents of race and birth, genetic inheritance, beliefs, family wealth, or the circumstances of their upbringing.

Applying these principles to match the needs of a particular business is another matter. Managers seem to find difficulty in making the step from a moral and intellectual acceptance of the 'diversity' principle, to taking a genuinely 'inclusive' approach to the management of their organisation's affairs. In other words, they fail to see a difference between diversity, the stage where organisations aim to become more diverse by employing people from many different backgrounds, and 'inclusion': the stage where the differences and values of each individual are truly recognised and allowed to flourish to make them feel that they are a productive and valued member of the organisation.

Exclusion is easier than inclusion
We are all legally bound not to discriminate against others in employment matters on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, physical disability and, soon, age. How many of us, hand on heart, can say that a single day of our lives passes without some fragment of a less enlightened attitude crossing our mind, or at least our path?

Acknowledging the intrinsic merit and inevitability of the 'diversity' argument in a changing and shrinking world is straightforward enough. Applying it to issues like employment, recruitment, immigration, not to mention taxation, healthcare and education, is a minefield of complexities. Over centuries, *exclusion* has become enshrined in the customs, language, administrative mechanisms and legal framework of most developed nations.

However worthy and admirable the notion, the actual task of bridging the gap between token 'diversity' and real 'inclusion' remains monumental. We have to unravel generations of bigotry, prejudice and ignorance and sometimes dismantle entire social, organisational and community structures, to travel each step on this road.

Paying lip service to diversity is largely a question of behavioural propriety; inclusiveness involves changing hearts, minds and methods. It's about valuing the person behind the superficial stereotype. Quite another matter.

So what's at stake?
An inclusive organisation is a unified one. If people work within an organisation that they feel respects them and their individuality, then they are more likely to be loyal, less likely to move somewhere else. Inclusive organisations have high morale and this can have a huge impact on productivity.

An inclusive organisation is in a far stronger position to impact business to business relations with suppliers, retailers, wholesalers, distributors and agents. It's also able to leverage skills, experience and mental models in international environments, decrease risks when entering new markets, and support effective new product development in international environments.

For example, let's take a company operating a fleet of HGVs. The management may recognise that the easiest solution to the problem of an imminent shortage of trained and experienced male drivers is to recruit more female drivers. Fairly straightforward, you might think. Women are equally capable of physically controlling modern power-assisted haulage rigs and materials handling equipment. But to do so, a time-honoured (though discriminatory and illegal) assumption that driving a long-distance goods vehicle is

somehow a strictly male preserve, clearly needs to be swept aside.

The fully inclusive management solution would need to take account of women's wider family responsibilities, deep-rooted attitudes to women spending long periods of time away from their homes and families, or their psychological suitability for long hours of tedious work in comparative isolation. Attitudes to women truck drivers in some sensitive overseas markets might need to be examined, too, along with pay and other differentials.

It may well prove to be the case that women or members of other minority groups are equally equipped to carry out areas of transport and logistics management that were also previously regarded as IC, male preserves. Bringing about this cultural shift could require an elaborate training and re-education programme, with trade union and other contractual consequences.

Maybe the solution isn't so simple.

No choice
Within a decade or so, historic falling birth rates in the UK will cause an inexorable shift toward the recruitment of increasingly diverse workforces. The proportions of

workers outside what are now regarded as 'normal' age limits, gender stereotypes and recruits from other cultures, are certain to increase progressively, as is the number of employees with disabilities. If organisations, both public and private, are to survive and prosper, they will become increasingly reliant on employees from such minority groups. If the economy of this, one of the world's wealthiest nations, is to be sustained and thrive, it will come to rely much more heavily on the inclusion of minority groups.

My core contention is that full inclusion of these diverse groups is not an altruistic or politically correct option or fashionable foible, it is an inescapable imperative for any forward thinking management. Organisations that fail to put processes in to encourage, train, motivate and give responsibility to employees from minority groups, will find themselves at a serious disadvantage in the years to come.

In the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, socially equitable, non-judgemental, employee-scarce society in which the business of this country will be conducted in years to come, the prejudices and divisions which have constrained and damaged society for

generations will finally be overturned. Adopting politically correct attitudes won't bring about these changes. Commercial expediency, market forces and social necessity will drive them. And they won't happen spontaneously; they'll need to be engineered by positive management.

Simon Kettleborough is a director of Performance Through Inclusion (PTI), a management consultancy devoted to moving large organisations through the process of genuinely including workers from minority groups into the mainstream of their activity. PTI clients include Royal Mail, Department of Health, DeBeers, Pearson plc and the Ministry of Defence. Simon can be contacted on 01204 887 090 or simon.kettleborough@performancethroughinclusion.com