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ETHNICITY AND POLITICS AT WORK: EMPLOYER TOOLKIT

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1 INTRODUCTION

The representation of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) individuals in senior positions is a topic that has generated mounting concern in recent years. At present the percentage of BAME individuals at lower organisational levels far outnumbers the percentage of those at the top, a pattern observed in both public and private sectors¹.

Progression and advancement through the workplace is evidently challenging for BAME employees. While organisations have focussed, justifiably so, on structuring *formal* processes and enhancing their transparency to reduce bias and improve equal opportunity, this toolkit focuses on the role that the *informal*, and often political, side of organisations plays in BAME career progression.

This toolkit has been produced from the findings of a project sponsored by the Richard Benjamin Trust, undertaken by Dr Madeleine Wyatt at the University of Kent. The aims of the project were to:

- Develop greater awareness of the impact of organisational politics on BAME career experiences
- Identify how organisations can minimise the impact of workplace politics on BAME careers
- Find ways that organisations can better support BAME employees in navigating workplace politics

The project involved interviews with 45 BAME employees and diversity professionals from a range of public and private sector organisations. We asked them about their career experiences and for examples where politics had positively, as well as negatively, impacted their career advancement. We

also gathered information about how they learnt about, and how they felt about, engaging in workplace politics.

The information from these interviews, as well as best practice tips from academic literature, have been used to develop this toolkit for employers to tackle the impact of politics on BAME careers.

“If I’m aspiring to senior leadership or management you tend to have to play a bit of politics and as I go further up the chain there will only be more.”
(Participant 7, Female, British Indian*)

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participants in our research who took the time to share their career experiences with us, the impact workplace politics has had on their lives and the hints and tips they had to succeed. Without these individuals this toolkit would not be possible.

We would also like to thank the Richard Benjamin Trust for funding this project as well as Business in the Community’s Race for Opportunity campaign who supported our efforts to seek participants.

“There is something about unforeseen, invisible career barriers that I can’t seem to shift”
(Participant 45, Female, BME Indian)

* We asked our participants to identify their own ethnicity which is why terminology for ethnic groups may vary

2 WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

This guide highlights the influence that workplace politics has on BAME careers. It offers practical steps that employers can take to tackle political practices in organisations and support employees to navigate them effectively. While the focus of this toolkit is on ethnicity and politics, the guidance offered to employers is applicable to all employees.

This guide is freely available for anyone interested in the impact workplace politics can have on employees' workplace experiences. This guide is particularly relevant to HR professionals, line managers, organisational diversity specialists and employee support groups.

“There’s still a glass ceiling whether I like it or not. I’ve been around here and I’ve seen people that are from minorities and they seem to find it quite difficult to climb; politics has really pulled them back” (Participant 34, Male, Black African)

3 WHAT IS WORKPLACE POLITICS?

Workplace politics involves the behaviours and processes that are used to allow people to compete for power, influence and resources. Politics can include practices such as:

- Lobbying hiring managers
- Scape-goating
- Adopting influence tactics, such as self-promotion
- Bypassing and/or interfering with formal procedures (eg, being hired without an interview or favouritism during appraisal).

As such 'politics' has a bad reputation, and is often considered undesirable, underhanded and Machiavellian. But politics is not necessarily 'bad', it can be used for *positive* outcomes depending on motive. Examples of positive political behaviours are:

- Knowledge sharing
- Building relationships
- Negotiation to secure resources
- Networking to expand the impact of one's work
- Influencing agendas

In fact, political behaviour actually becomes a role requirement of many senior positions where negotiating and securing resources for one's team becomes a priority¹¹. Understanding and navigating workplace politics is not only important to progress but also becomes essential for performing effectively at senior levels.

"If there's an issue I want to get resolved; knowing the right people helps me get an understanding of what's going on in the broader context. I think in my role there's quite a lot of focus on involvement in relationships and connectivity" (Participant 39, Male, British Indian)

It is therefore important that employers work to reduce negative political behaviours but also to facilitate and support BAME individuals in developing political skills without compromising their values.

"There are a lot of sort of political machinations that are unwritten but that exist and which no-one points out or tells you about" (Participant 40, Male, British Indian)

4 WHY IS WORKPLACE POLITICS RELEVANT TO ETHNICITY?

The disparity between the number of BAME workers in lower organisational levels and those reaching senior positions is found across private and public sector organisations and there is growing concern over the lack of BAME representation in Britain's boardrooms. With BAME employees receiving lower pay, fewer promotions and experiencing slower progression than their white colleagues¹, organisations need to look for ways to better support BAME workers' career advancement.

Two routes to success

Previous research¹¹ has identified that in order to progress upwards to senior leadership roles there are two different routes that can be followed:

- 1 **Formal route** Using formal processes, such as training programmes, appraisals to enhance performance in the role and promotion procedures to progress. They are usually governed by organisations, are monitored for equal opportunity and have transparent requirements.
- 2 **Informal or political route** Navigating workplace politics to develop power, trustworthiness, influence and a reputation for effectiveness.

"We've got all the formal processes around interviewing, you know, recruitment exercises, all that sort of thing so the whole approach is very formal and structured and yet in parallel of course we've got this other process going on which is all about informal relationships" (Participant 44, Female, Mixed race)

Our research suggests that BAME employees are more likely to rely on the formal route for two reasons:

- **Information** In many cases our interviewees reported realising late into their career that there was an informal or political route that others used to progress. It is also difficult to learn about how to navigate this political side of organisations. In contrast, information about formal procedures is readily available (eg, which competencies are required for promotion).

"There are always the black and white rules of what's needed to progress in your career but also the hidden rules which nobody ever tells you about" (Participant 34, Male, Black African)

"To me I thought if you are good enough, you've got your qualifications, you've got the experience then you should be able to progress but I've come to know that a lot of the time it's not about what you know" (Participant 33, Male, Asian)

"To be honest I never used to know that there was so much politics." (Participant 6, Female, Asian)

- **Values** Many of our interviewees felt that engaging in politics was immoral and went against their core values. These attitudes appear to be stronger amongst BAME than white individuals because they may have experienced greater struggles in the workplace and thus, understandably, place a great deal of emphasis on meritocracy.

"I tend to avoid getting involved in politics." (Participant 7, Female, British Indian)

"I've always thought you're judged on your abilities and you get rewarded for the work that you put in – that's my whole thing, you know, and this is why I have a problem with politics. I mean it would have been easy for me and in fact it would be very easy for me...to get that job from my mentor and go ahead and retire. But no, I couldn't do it. No. There's no way" (Participant 15, Male, Black African)

"My ability to spot [politics] is better but then on the flip side my willingness to engage in it has reduced over time...It just feels a bit like game playing...I just find that I'm not of that temperament, I'm not that kind of person and I think because I'm not displaying those kinds of behaviours that I think are incongruent for me, I don't think I've gotten on as well as other people have gotten on." (Participant 3, Female, Afro Caribbean)

"you think 'oh my god, I wouldn't do that' or 'that seems a bit sneaky' or 'why are they doing it this way?'" (Participant 18, Male, Asian)

Crucially though, without support to use both routes BAME careers may suffer. Our previous research found that white individuals are more likely to use both strategies **in tandem**. This means they are not only considered to be performing effectively in the role, but develop a *reputation* for performing effectively. This reputation extends across their networks and the wider organisation, meaning they progress more swiftly than their BAME colleagues.

"I still struggle with how to deal with workplace politics and I just wish that somebody could make it go away, which is never going to happen" (Participant 24, Female, Pakistani Asian)

We propose that organisations need to support BAME employees better in using *both* strategies to advance and this toolkit provides information on the second, political route, which has thus far been overlooked by many diversity initiatives.

5 PRACTICAL TOOLKIT

There are a number of practical steps that employers can take to reduce the impact of negative organisational politics and also support BAME employees in navigating the political workplace. These are outlined in the following sections:

- Selection and Promotion
- Improving mentoring and sponsorship
- Enhancing access to networks
- Information and training

Each section provides top tips for employers based on our findings from this research as well as management literature.

5.1 Selection and promotion

Many of our interviewees spoke about politics interfering with selection and promotion procedures and were concerned with the fairness of such processes as a result. For example, panel interviews were reported as often politicised, with hiring managers manipulating the system to enable them to hire the candidate they want. Emphasis is placed on personal relationships and reputation.

“The conversations that happen behind closed doors are more powerful than an interview. You know, don’t get me wrong, you have to go through an interview process, but if your manager could create that

perception to another manager about you that he or she is a really good worker or they’re like this then already you’ve set that scene in that individual’s head even before you get to an interview so it really depends on who your manager is and who the management is and how they sell you” (Participant 18, Male, Asian)

‘Somehow before we could go for interviews – I certainly didn’t have a problem with in terms of coming through that favourably – the rules were kind of changed to say well instead of an interview we’ll go by consensus. So a management team then was set up to look for candidates outside the formal process and I lost that job and clearly I know the only reason why I lost it is because I didn’t go for an interview.’ (Participant 33, Male, Black African)

Although many also benefited from politics in selection. Usually these examples involved gaining insider knowledge and using relationships with hiring managers to adjust application forms and interview technique.

“I went and had a chat with the person who’s now my boss, talked about the role, got some insight about how we’d approach the interview...you know, and it was fairly clear that I was going to be a contender for the role so that’s...politicking and I got, yeah, probably got an advantage on this role through that approach” (Participant 39, Male, British Indian)

Tips for employers

- 1 Don’t assume that formal processes are immune from workplace politics. Train your staff to understand the impact of politics on peoples’ careers and its negative effect on diversity.
- 2 Interview staff that have been successful and unsuccessful in selection and assessment procedures to determine *how* these processes have become politicised. Take steps to address this, such as enhancing transparency, clarifying roles and responsibilities and reducing informality.
- 3 Use interviews with management to identify *why* processes may have become politicised. We found common reasons were to speed up decision making and to have greater control about what was assessed and how it was assessed. Take steps to address these, such as offering greater consultation with those who implement formal procedures.
- 4 To avoid favouritism, offer all employees the opportunity to learn about new roles and provide bespoke advice to prepare for assessments (eg, on application forms, interview style).
- 5 Tell staff about the steps you have taken to reduce politics in the workplace so that they can see you are investigating these issues, which helps to enhance trust in formal procedures

5 PRACTICAL TOOLKIT (CONT)

5.2 Improving mentoring and sponsorship

Our interviewees talked about the importance of finding a mentor, or someone who can 'show you the ropes', in an organisation and champion you to others (sponsorship). Mentors have a range of functions, for example they can:

- Enhance understanding about the political landscape of the workplace
- Share information about who holds power
- Identify job opportunities
- Develop mentees' task-related and political skills
- Share network contacts
- Offer friendship and support
- Actively represent and advocate for mentees (sponsors)

"First of all you need to have a mentor and if that mentor can turn into a sponsor for you who gets to know your work and rates you then they can be hugely important in your career. I used to...have a negative view that "oh so-and-so is not particularly good but has got an influential friend and they help you get a job"; I still believe that would be wrong and that would be grossly unfair ...but I think the other, positive view of it is where...you've worked hard and you are skilled, you are knowledgeable but you're not getting a break because you don't have anyone in an

influential position to champion you and now I realise the importance of that, that you do need to get yourself known, recognised by people in a position to help you and build a profile so you're known about. That is a positive thing" (Participant 41, Female, Middle Eastern)

However, BAME individuals may find it harder to find mentors and sponsors who have this type of knowledge and access to power, because there are fewer BAME employees at senior levels. Finding senior white mentors or sponsors is of course a useful strategy but existing research^{IV} has found individuals may need to overcome cultural differences before strong relationships can be formed.

"There are really cliquy relationships where, you know, people have mentors in the workplace and...it's very difficult to progress your career if you cannot get into cliques or you can't find a mentor or a sponsor who thinks well of you and recognises your skills and capabilities" (Participant 20, Female, Indian)

"Now I have a formal mentor but really the mentoring from which I learnt all this was informal, just talking to people, people who take an interest in you and asking... just talking with them really about particular situations and what to do or what not to" (Participant 23, Male, Black African)

Tips for employers

Our tips for employers focus largely on providing formal mentoring arrangements to overcome the difficulties BAME individuals face in accessing mentoring and sponsorship within organisations:

- 1 Think long term: Formal mentoring is often only arranged for several months meaning bonds between mentor and mentee are not given time to form properly, which is particularly relevant for overcoming differences in ethnic background. Longer term arrangements are more likely to provide greater benefits for all parties.
- 2 Urge mentors to broach the topic of organisational politics, open up their networks and take on a sponsorship role for their mentees, and monitor whether this happens.
- 3 When matching mentees and mentors consider
 - a The ethnicity (and gender) of participants eg, BAME mentees may benefit from BAME mentors who have experienced similar struggles, but they will also benefit from white mentors who may have a different perspective and larger networks
 - b The power that mentors have within the organisation; mentors who do not hold senior roles may not have access to beneficial information and resources.
- 4 Provide clear guidelines about confidentiality so that mentees and mentors can feel they can discuss issues, particularly around diversity, openly during mentoring sessions without fear of repercussions.
- 5 Encourage individuals to proactively seek out multiple mentors/sponsors. Those who do tend to progress more quickly as they have a range of sources for career information and support

5.3 Enhancing access to networks

Informal networks, or relationships between groups of colleagues, are often regarded as vital for career advancement because they provide knowledge about workplace politics, offer support and friendship and allow people to develop a reputation across the organisation.

"I think I probably learnt a heck of a lot more around how to navigate the politics through colleagues and peers than probably any other mechanism"
(Participant 5, Male, Indian)

"In career progression it's who you know that pushes you forward, you know. And even if you know... if you are very, very good at what you do it can only take you so far, beyond that you can't go any further because the right people don't know you"
(Participant 22, Male, Black African)

Research suggests that BAME individuals find it challenging to develop network relationships at work as they may not share racial or cultural similarities with those at the top^v. This can mean BAME employees' networks are less powerful, provide less information and fewer resources than the networks of their white colleagues.

Our interviewees reported finding it particularly difficult to break into networks and work groups, were often shut out of decisions, less able to get their hard work noticed, and not provided with pertinent career information, such as job openings.

"You sense there was a clique and you weren't part of the clique no matter how hard you worked."
(Participant 16, Male, Indian South African)

"I would say I avoid politics...it's not something that I would rush to engage in because in order to do that you need allies and I think that needs a lot of investment in time and you have to be in the group and I don't know how to be in the in group when I'm in my own group... I remain the last ethnic minority..I'm just in my own group" (Participant 32, Female, Black British)

"Cliques can be well established depending on where people have come from, be it school, university or region or where they have trained together – that sort of thing. So if you are coming from elsewhere it's definitely an uphill struggle, almost an impossible task to break into those cliques and establish yourself within that subculture"
(Participant 17, Male, Black African)

Tips for employers

- 1 Provide formal networks or support forums for staff. They can offer functions such as career development, friendship and support, championing diversity issues and networking.
- 2 Encourage formal networks to be inclusive of all ethnicities. Although BAME networks can provide self-help and support to their members, they provide less opportunity to network with those who hold powerful/senior positions and can pass down career information (ie, white males)
- 3 Ensure formal networks are regularly attended by individuals in powerful positions who can impart knowledge about political processes
- 4 Train staff and particularly managers on the negative impact of selective networks on BAME careers and the importance of being inclusive in informal as well as formal workplace interactions
- 5 Offer staff training on how to develop networking strategies.

5 PRACTICAL TOOLKIT (CONT)

5.4 Information and training

Our interviewees reported a lack of information about workplace politics. Many talked about the negative impact of not realising that others were engaging in politics until late into their careers, and others expressed frustration about how to engage with the political side of organisations.

“First of all I was never aware of it before and I used to think that, you know, you just have to put in the hard work and do the application and go through the interview process ... I think I now realise that I've been completely in the dark and I didn't have a realistic view of the workplace” (Participant 41, Female, Middle Eastern)

It is of course important that organisations work to reduce politics, but given the prevalence of workplace politics across different sectors and contexts it is also important to support employees in navigating organisational politics. Yet, according to our interviewees, there is very little support provided for them to learn about workplace politics and develop their political skills.

“But certainly I'm not aware of any formal sort of learning that tells you how to be good at it” (Participant 44, Female, Mixed race)

“I read books to try and inform myself about politics....I've never had any structured training around work politics but it is something I have proactively become more aware of and try to develop” (Participant 39, Male, British Indian)

Tips for employers

- 1 Storytelling initiatives can enhance awareness about the impact of politics (both good and bad) on individual careers. Asking senior role models to explain how they have progressed using both formal and political strategies will help employees understand different routes to success and become more at ease with engaging in workplace politics.
- 2 Encourage staff to stay up to date with contemporary management and leadership literature that highlights the importance of political skills in senior roles.
- 3 Provide seminars and workshops to discuss different career paths and the 'good' and 'bad' forms of workplace politics
- 4 Train staff in the skills that will help them navigate workplace politics successfully^{vi}. These include:
 - a Choosing the most appropriate behaviours for different social situations
 - b Putting others at ease and rapport building
 - c Building coalitions and useful networks
 - d Being sincere and demonstrating integrity
- 5 Utilise training resources to support employees in developing their networks.

6 FURTHER INFORMATION

Links

For further support about diversity and career progression there are a number of organisations who provide a range of resources and information:

Equality and Human Rights Commission <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/>

Race for Opportunity <http://www.bitc.org.uk/list/programmes/race-opportunity>

Runnymede Trust <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/>

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Dr Madeleine Wyatt is a senior lecturer in Human Resource Management at the University of Kent and is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist. Her research examines how individuals navigate the informal or political nature of organisations to reach senior roles with a specific focus on diversity. She has worked with public and private sector organisations to develop tools to support BAME employees' progression in the workplace including political skills training. She also works with local and national politicians to study political leadership and identify predictors of political performance.

Fatima Tresh worked as a research assistant on this project. Fatima is an ESRC. Her research examines biases in identifying and selecting high-potential leadership candidates. Specifically, Fatima looks at intergroup settings and focuses her work on biases against women and "outgroup" members.

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