

MIND YOUR  
“Ps” AND “Qs”  
FOR EQUITY

Few, if any, leaders would admit willingly that their leadership philosophy is biased or non-inclusive. But many leaders do acknowledge that they have awareness gaps and that, despite the best intentions, are still unable to move the needle from intent to impact when it comes to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) at work. In recent years, growing awareness of the difference between striving for ‘equality’ and ‘equity’ is also driving a lot of conversations. One area where we can all benefit – and where organizational leaders in particular can benefit – is in focusing more on equity at work. Over time, we have realized that diversity alone is not enough and that propping it up without creating culture change can lead to conflict and discrimination. Using an equity lens supports the creation of sustainable processes and systems to create those conditions of inclusion.

While all of this sounds good in theory, what does “equity at work” actually look like in practice? Mahzarin Banaji, a psychologist famous for her work on implicit bias put it elegantly, “Bias is the thumbprint of the culture on our brains.” To put it another way, we internalize bias as the “way of being.” For those of us seeking to mind our Ps and Qs with regard to equity, this raises the question: How do we proceed knowing that bias and certain ways of being and seeing have been imprinted into our brains by the social and organizational cultures of which we are a part?

We believe change often starts with asking the right questions – i.e. the “Qs”. And to help you remember what those Qs might be, we’ve provided you five broad areas to focus on – the “Ps”.

## PEOPLE

### Q: Whose voices are heard?

Research shows that having ‘voice’ is a key element of feeling treated fairly at work. Even if the final decision or outcome differs from what you had suggested, merely having the opportunity to share your perspective engenders a feeling of belonging and being valued.

**Tip:** In your next meeting, create space for those who have not yet spoken up proactively but might have something to contribute. Offer alternative ways to share for those who might be more comfortable with other means than talking in a meeting (e.g. anonymous polls or asynchronous brainstorming tools).

### Q: Whose needs are met?

The history of universal or inclusive design is filled with instructive stories on how designing for one group (or even ‘designing for the extremes’) can benefit many other groups in unanticipated ways. If you enjoy the benefits of closed captioning, texting on your phone or pushing your baby’s stroller down the slopes at the end of pavements you can thank the “curb cut effect”, because these designs were intended to benefit specific groups with disabilities but have ended up being beneficial to several others – much like the “curb cut” (the ramp at the end of a sidewalk/curb) was designed for wheelchair users but is used by stroller-pushers, runners, luggage-pullers and others.

**Tip:** Next time you’re planning a virtual event, design it with accessibility and ease of use of all participants in mind.

## PRACTICES

### Q: What are the unwritten rules? How do employees (especially from marginalized groups/identities) learn these?

Think about the last time you were new to an organization or a social group. Did you learn more about how to get things done by talking to others, or by reading the employee handbook on your intranet? Exactly! Now – how can we ensure that everyone has equal access to learning about these unwritten rules, and even more fundamentally, that no critical decisions are made based on knowledge of such rules.

**Tip:** Remove reliance on unwritten rules and informal contracts – insisting on transparent and equitable decision making. For instance, consider articulating guiding principles that work-related decisions must take place during work conversations, with transparency and the appropriate people involved.

## **Q: How (im)possible is it to envision different ways of working?**

The whole idea behind DEI efforts is that diversity brings advantages: new ways of thinking, problem solving, interacting, relating and achieving outcomes. The reason many people from marginalized groups feel excluded, however, is that new ways of working are not welcome in many contexts that are accustomed to homogeneity and an existing way of approaching work. People from marginalized groups often feel the need to cover /hide their identities, feel like imposters, and face discrimination at work.

**Tip:** When you find yourself questioning if someone fits the organizational culture, or wishing they acted differently – flip the script – ask yourself how you might respond if they were from the dominant group or shared your own identity or background.

## POWER

### **Q: Who is in power?**

Who has the authority, influence and ability to make decisions that impact others? It is no secret that even organizations that are diverse at the base, become increasingly homogeneous in terms of race and gender towards the top.

**Tip:** Set an intention to share or give up power whenever possible. Offer someone from a marginalized group your next speaking engagement or invite them to collaborate on a high profile client project. Pass the mic.

### **Q: Who benefits from the current system?**

The lack of proportionate representation across levels of an organization threatens equity and signals that true change in systems will be elusive as long as those who benefit from the current systems continue to hold power.

**Tip:** Next time a big organizational decision is announced (e.g., merger, new market), gently start a conversation around who is benefitting from it and how, and more importantly, which key stakeholders are missing from the decision but might be impacted by it.

## POLICIES

### **Q: How were your organization's policies developed – and by whom?**

Often unknowingly – and without questioning norms – organizational/HR policies have not evolved to accommodate those whose gender, racial/ethnic background, education, language, wealth/income status, and access to transport, childcare, healthcare

and equipment might not match the original prototype. The shift to remote/hybrid work further prompts us to question and refresh policies in ways that benefit all.

**Tip:** Review your policies – such as parental leave, challenging heteronormative norms that provide maternity leave only (if that); expand the policies to include fathers, same-sex partners and all family units.

### **Q: How progressive/current are your policies?**

Chances are that policies like unlimited leave, pay transparency, parental leave for all, flexible work arrangements and other such policies that signal empowerment and trust in employees also attract talent from diverse populations by removing constraints to their participation in the workforce.

**Tip:** Start publishing salary ranges in job descriptions and the words "Salary negotiable" to provide clear salary anchors and thus reduce pressure on women and underrepresented group members to negotiate in a vacuum, risking backlash or unfairly low pay.

## PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

### **Q: How is success defined?**

The 'work devotion' schema has led to unsustainable ideals of what a 'good leader', 'good worker' and even a 'good man' and 'good woman' have come to mean. In such a schema, the person who is 'meritorious' is one who works long hours, neglects family, self-care and personal interests in favor of work, makes sacrifices (e.g. long commutes, weekends and nights) in the hope of a pay raise or promotion. We have come to see such a person as the ideal worker, and those who deviate from these norms as less committed to their employers and even as poor performers. These ideal worker norms and assumptions about meritocracy paradoxically end up backfiring and might result in more inequities despite their intention.

**Tip:** Role model self-care and disrupt the work devotion schema by finding what works for you and visibly demonstrating that (e.g. not working weekends might work for you, but working weekends and taking breaks through the week might work for others – support what works for your employees).

### **Q: How are developmental opportunities assigned?**

Plenty of research shows that when it comes to assigning stretch assignments and projects with high visibility and high impact projects (e.g. P&L responsibilities, high risk work, international assignments), women and other underrepresented groups "slip through the cracks." This is especially the

case when the process relies on employees to self-nominate or on informal networks to make suggestions on who might be suitable. More systematic, data-driven and intentional efforts to identify employees based on their talent and potential, and not just how easily they come to mind are needed.

**Tip:** Ask, don't assume! Look to see if assignments are fair and reflect the pool proportionately.

As Minal Bopiah eloquently writes in her book *Equity: How to Design Organizations Where Everyone Thrives*, "Systems of oppression, inequalities, and inequities are by design. Therefore, only intentional design can dismantle them." Next time you are faced with an organizational decision – whom to hire, promote, assign to a new client, or how to respond to an employee grievance or request for a new policy – think about the questions raised here and question the assumptions around People, Practices, Policies, Power and Performance Standards that are informing your decisions. When it comes to designing and running organizations in more equitable ways, leaders like you would do well to mind your Ps and Qs!

## NO ONE IS SURE ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF THE PHRASE: "MIND YOUR Ps AND Qs."

Does it derive from an 18th century English poem about learning the alphabet? Or from French dance instructors admonishing their students to mind their pieds and queues? Or, my favourite, from fussy drinkers insisting that the bartender not confuse the Ps (pints) and Qs (quarts) of beer orders? Regardless of its provenance, its meaning in today's world is clear: it denotes minding one's behaviour, or staying alert and monitoring oneself in watchful ways.

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