What can leaders do to create class inclusion?

Get class conscious – class counts at work

"All executives and senior management come from upper-class backgrounds (private school education, reside in the most expensive suburbs) so they don't see class as a barrier."

4% Leaders are much less likely to be from a class marginalised background than other workers – only 4% of leaders are **class marginalised**, while 40% are class privileged.[1]

24% Leaders are therefore much less likely than other employees to recognise class bias – 24% of leaders **strongly disagreed** that 'Australia is a class-free society,' compared to 33% of other workers.

Yet Diversity Council Australia research shows that:

22% Less than 1 in 4 (22%) class marginalised workers strongly agree they are **valued and respected in their team**, compared to 41% of class privileged workers.
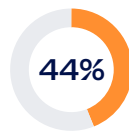
44% Only 44% of class marginalised workers have been **offered career development opportunities** in the past 12 months, compared to 76% of class privileged workers.

Recruit for class diversity

"All our company directors have come from private boys' schools and are just not aware that there's a large, competent workforce outside of the private school system."

Avoid recruiting and promoting someone because they attended an elite private school or university. These are much harder for class marginalised candidates to access and are not necessarily predictors of job performance.[2]

Diversify networking and socialising

"I've seen people being referred to as 'not a team player', because they could not go out after work for financial reasons and been labelled as 'difficult' when they could not afford to pay for something upfront, to be reimbursed later."

Avoid networking opportunities and social events that involve a high cost to participate (e.g. theatre, golf, cycling, sailing, "fine dining"). Class marginalised workers are less likely to have disposable income and more likely to face long commutes, as affordable housing is typically located further from city centres.

Use inclusive language

"I've sat in rooms while other recruitment panel members have mocked the poor clothes of some of the candidates and their 'bogan' presentation."

To create more welcoming and inclusive environments, leaders can address jokes or phrases that may be offensive and classist (e.g. words like 'houso,' 'bogan,' 'povo,' 'rough').

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Approach internships with caution

"I work in an industry where a lot of career success can rely on being able to do unpaid internships. At a previous organisation we had a student completing three months of full-time work for us unpaid. When I mentioned this might be an opportunity that excludes people who can't afford to work for free, I was basically scoffed at."

Avoid valuing unpaid or low-paid internships when recruiting. These are often organised through parents' professional networks and can only be undertaken by people who are financially supported. Class marginalised people are much less likely to be able to access and undertake internship opportunities.[3]

Check for "rich" traits

"I grew up in a refugee-background family, poor, and am earning the most anybody in my house had ever earnt (and this is in a graduate job). I don't have stories to share about family holidays, books, certain foods, fancy restaurants, interesting experiences and lacked access to so many things growing up. To this day, I still don't have the time or money to do the same things as my colleagues."

Leadership models used for assessing talent in Australian organisations often value "rich" traits that class privileged people are more likely to have — traits such as:

- educational credentials from elite institutions[4]
- having a "posh" accent, vocabulary and communication style more often associated with class privileged people[5]
- appearing a certain way, particularly in expensive clothing and styling[6]
- participating and having an interest in elite hobbies and activities (e.g. expensive sports, wine tasting and fine dining, theatre).[7]

Look for "cultural add" not "cultural fit"

"The euphemism 'well-spoken' is often used to gloss a preference for people with a middle-class accent, affect, or lexicon, by implying they are 'just a better fit'. At my regional institution, city accents are clearly preferred to country ones."

Look past whether applicants are the sort of people you like to spend time with. This just plays into our affinity bias, where we favour people who are like us (i.e. with the same hobbies, schooling, or dress style). Instead, identify what is missing from your organisational culture and which values are key to that culture (e.g. strong work ethic, collaboration). Then recruit people who can bring these qualities to the organisation.

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