



A strengths-based approach to building an inclusive workplace

Why wouldn't you?

Jan Peters MBE February 2017

Katalytik began exploring inclusive cultures in engineering back in 2011 when we started to explore the reasons behind the difference in transition rates between male and female engineering graduates into engineering jobs. Since then we have refined our programmes, gained certifications and developed a our own audit tool. Oh, and had a few success stories along the way.

Underpinning this work is a strengths-based philosophy. Focusing on what is right with people rather than what's not. We recognise implicit bias and we help people to be aware of bias, but we don't see that training in this is the complete answer to change and the creation of an inclusive workplace.

Equality, diversity and inclusion is a collective phrase with a wide meaning. Each of the three key words are frequently used interchangeably and with little thought to their real meaning, although in recent times the focus has been on inclusion. For those still in doubt about the differences in equality, diversity and inclusion:

- **Equality** is to treat people equally; but this rarely results in an equal outcome. Not everyone has the same needs in order to achieve and succeed.
- **Diversity** refers to the mix of people within a workplace; widening your recruitment pool does not guarantee you will create a more diverse workforce at all levels. If 'different' people don't feel like they belong, they will leave and in doing so are more likely to damage your brand's diversity credentials.
- **Inclusion** refers to how you treat people. It means the workplace culture. If people feel like they belong and are valued then they will be engaged and motivated. This fact is likely to enhance your brand as your Ambassadors and the public face of your business will speak to more diverse communities.

The backstory

In the 2011 Set to Lead project we worked initially with four universities, 25 businesses and the Women's Engineering Society, funded by the UK Higher Education Funding Council.

The project outputs included a series of role model days with Arup and Microsoft; an inclusive assessment centre guide; three team scenarios (with Arup, Highways Agency and Thoughtworks); and a train the trainer event for academics to incorporate inclusive team working scenarios within their courses. As part of the project we also undertook a large survey

of (over 4500) undergraduate engineers to explore the experiences and perceptions of male and female students (Jobs for the boys? McWhinnie and Peters, 2012)¹.

Our challenge was to pilot the creation of an environment in team working that helped ensure that each student was engaged and given the opportunity to contribute and be listened to.

The challenge was informed by our own observations and research and also that published by [Silbey and Seron](#)² (2016) who found lower career confidence in women engineering students than male counterparts and a cultural persistence in team dynamics and internships that deterred women from persisting in engineering.

The project leadership consultant Helen Duguid introduced Clifton StrengthsFinder to aid the students with developing their self-awareness and providing a vocabulary to talk about differences in ways of thinking and getting work done within projects. Our aim was to enable students to appreciate and value each other, but also to gain confidence in being able to talk about the value they bring to a team.

Our approach to strengths-based inclusion

At Katalytik we have developed this approach, and embraced a strengths-based approach to inclusion, by becoming certified practitioners, by Gallup, to use the [CliftonStrengths](#)³ tool.

The impact of introducing a positive psychology approach to your team means that:

- Team members become more self-aware
- Mutual respect grows between colleagues
- Colleagues give each other 'space' to be authentic
- Colleagues and managers begin to value contributions and not stereotypes
- Teams become empowered and engaged with a direct impact on project outcomes.

A clear illustration of impact came when the initial methodology was extended to a first year engineering project. Electronic students had undertaken this week long project for 5 years and each year typically half the teams would produce a successful working prototype. When we introduced strengths and awareness of bias and inclusion all the teams produced a working prototype. Feedback from the students highlighted the use of a team strengths grid, the opportunity (and vocabulary) to talk about what they each needed and could contribute with self-reflection. The students felt this helped them communicate and appreciate each other better.



Katalytik has since extended its use of CliftonStrengths to private sector teams, research staff and helping PhD students communicate with their supervisors better, adapting and evolving our approach. We have also developed an Advocate programme that provides ongoing support and coaching to internal strengths advocates (or Champions) to support the creation of a strengths based, inclusive culture.

More specifically within our workshops we introduce messages based on Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking Fast, Thinking Slow* theory. This helps to interrupt judgements made about others based on expected, or stereotyped, behaviours and builds foundations for a rational and logical approach to an inclusive environment. Quite simply, why wouldn't you?

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¹https://www.katalytik.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Summary_Report_Final.pdf

² <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/06/160615135205.htm>

³ <https://www.gallupstrengthscenter.com/>