



BROOK NO BOUNDARY

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION PROFESSIONAL
LESLEY BROOK EXPLAINS HOW YOU COULD
TAKE UP THIS WORTHY AND INTERESTING
CAREER.

Tell us about your background.

I am currently a Director of Brook Graham Limited, a Diversity and Inclusion Consultancy firm I co-founded in 2004 with my business partner. Prior to that, I held a global HR Management and Diversity role in Shell International. Before that, I spent three years as HR General Manager for Shell South Africa, based in Cape Town, in the immediate post-apartheid era when there was such incredible change occurring.

I developed my career through HR management: employee relations, policy development and organisation development. Issues of inclusion and exclusion were critical, for the individuals, for the organisation and ultimately for society. I wanted to understand the barriers and help to dismantle them. Being female (in a male-dominated industry) and gay, gave me personal insights.

What would you advise students to study if they wanted to move into this field?

It's not so much about what people study, as what experience they can get that will be relevant. You need to have a grounding in how organisations work; you need to establish a track record of achievement. This work is about influencing others to make change happen; in order to do that you need personal credibility. Get direct diversity experience by getting involved within the organisations you work in and externally: not-for-profit organisations and advocacy groups which work in the D&I arena.

Have you made a difference to people's lives?

I like to think I have. This work can create change inside organisations – in how leaders think about and behave towards people who are different from themselves. It also shows up in how organisations actively recruit and develop talented people from previously excluded or under-represented groups.

What are the most difficult areas you have to deal with?

When you encounter a powerful individual like a senior business leader who pays lip service to D&I but who doesn't 'get it' (or maybe doesn't want to get it) and doesn't support it in practice. Also, the nature of the subject involves some difficult dilemmas: different legal contexts for LGBT people; countries where full equality is enshrined in law, and countries where you can be executed for being gay.

Do employers need to concern themselves with having a diverse workforce?

Research says that organisations that create inclusive working environments, where all sorts of talented people can develop to their full potential, do better. They are more creative, productive and profitable – better able to adapt to changing circumstances and the diverse demands of their customers.

Are you in a civil partnership?

My partner and I have been together for 27 years and we got CP'd on the first day we could when the law changed (21/12/05).

Have you encountered homophobia in your personal life?

Like most gay people of my generation, I have. I had to think hard about how to come out at work, because I knew it could potentially damage my career chances. We still don't have enough openly gay senior role models in the corporate world or in public life. I don't see many instances of deliberate, anti-gay discrimination, but I do see examples of inadvertent, unconscious bias in favour of heterosexual people.

Do you think that diversity in the teaching profession would stop bullying?

It's essential we have teachers drawn from every section of society. It helps build respect and inclusion if children grow up with a variety of influential role models and teachers. It's great to see the initiatives being taken to prevent homophobic bullying in schools.