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Ethnic minorities

Well documented cases of racial discrimination within the army and the police in the UK have forced an overhaul of their recruitment and employee development processes with the aim of increasing the promotion prospects of black and ethnic recruits and to create internally a culture of equal opportunities.

A public inquiry's finding of "institutional racism" in the Metropolitan Police, evident in its handling of the Stephen Lawrence case - the racially inspired killing of a young black teenager in London - has led many public sector bodies to reassess their attitudes and approaches to equal opportunities within their workforces.

There is little evidence, however, of private sector employers following suit, particularly in the higher reaches of their organisations. The most successful business people from the ethnic minorities tend to be self-made entrepreneurs or from family companies.

Nowhere would a debate on equality and diversity be more relevant, perhaps, than in the most senior positions in blue chip companies. The representation of black or Asian directors on the boards of large public companies is virtually non-existent in the UK.

In the US, where "affirmative action", establishing quotas for African-American and ethnic recruits has been widely practised, fewer than 1 per cent of senior posts are held by executives from ethnic minorities.

Research by David Thomas and John Gabarro, both professors at Harvard Business School*, has found that promotions among the ethnic minorities are harder to come by in the earlier stages of their careers, than they are for whites.

Those who do make it to the top - people like Kenneth Chenault, president and chief operating officer of American Express, Solomon Trujillo, president and chief executive of US West Communications, and Ann Fudge, president of Maxwell House Coffee Company and Post Cereals - tend to do so by working harder and performing several degrees better than their white contemporaries.

As Thomas and Gabarro point out: "Once they make the leap into middle and upper management, these trailblazers have to put together a stellar record of performance while building a network of mentors to support and advise them."

The Harvard research involved a six-year study comparing the career experiences of 54 ethnic minority and white managers in three companies, all of which shared a commitment to diversity and promoting people from an ethnic background to prominent positions.

In spite of this commitment, the ethnic managers had a tougher time moving up the ranks. Fast track promotion did not tend to come their way. "Racial prejudice, whites' need for comfort and avoidance of risk, and the apparent difficulty of identifying minorities as high-potential each constitute major hurdles to the career mobility of minority managers," say the researchers.

Those who did succeed among the African-American, Asian and Hispanic candidates found that they moved more slowly than their contemporaries into middle management. But as the careers of the fast starters reached a plateau, the ethnic managers moved quickly through the middle tiers in to upper management. By that stage they were "marching in step" with white contemporaries, say Thomas and Gabarro.

Prof Thomas believes that the early career "lag" helped the ethnic candidates improve their professional competence and confidence. "Minority managers do, in fact, have to be more deeply grounded and better prepared than their white peers if they are to become top executives, because they are promoted only after proving themselves again and again," he says.

These findings, it should be stressed, were among companies whose managements went to unusual lengths to promote equal opportunities in the workplace. One of them established "dialogue groups" in which employees could discuss their views towards other ethnic groups. The idea of such groups is to bring racial attitudes out into the open.

How effective they are is difficult to judge. The study found that one of the most effective ways of helping ethnic minority employers was to provide them with a mentor. The most successful candidates had several mentors and excelled themselves in developing relationships. This enabled them to secure challenging assignments which sent messages to others in the company that these employees were considered high performers. Some of the mentors later effectively became "career sponsors" helping minorities along to new positions.

A report by Korn/Ferry International, the headhunter, that last year looked at 280 ethnic minority executives in US financial institutions, agreed with the importance placed on mentoring. Most of the executives they surveyed had developed personal strategies for dealing with racism in the workplace. Most were good at developing or accessing networks which would provide career opportunities.

But employing companies could also improve their response to the needs of minorities, says the report, ensuring not only that they have mentors but that the mentors are selected and trained to pass on the informal information, rules and networks that operate, often beneath the surface of an organisation.

Some of these strategies will not look so remarkable to those who have relied on such methods for their journey to the top. But many executives on white dominated boards have been playing these games since their school days. The alternative to adopting a solid commitment to diversity is to pay lip service to the equality laws without understanding the benefits.

For some companies such commitment may amount to an act of faith, since only when boards become more diverse will the real benefits of diversity become apparent.

*Breaking Through: The making of Minority Executives in Corporate America, By David Thomas and John Gabarro, is published by Harvard Business School Press, price \$ 29.95. The Korn/Ferry report is called Diversity in the Executive Suite: Creating Successful Career Paths and Strategies.