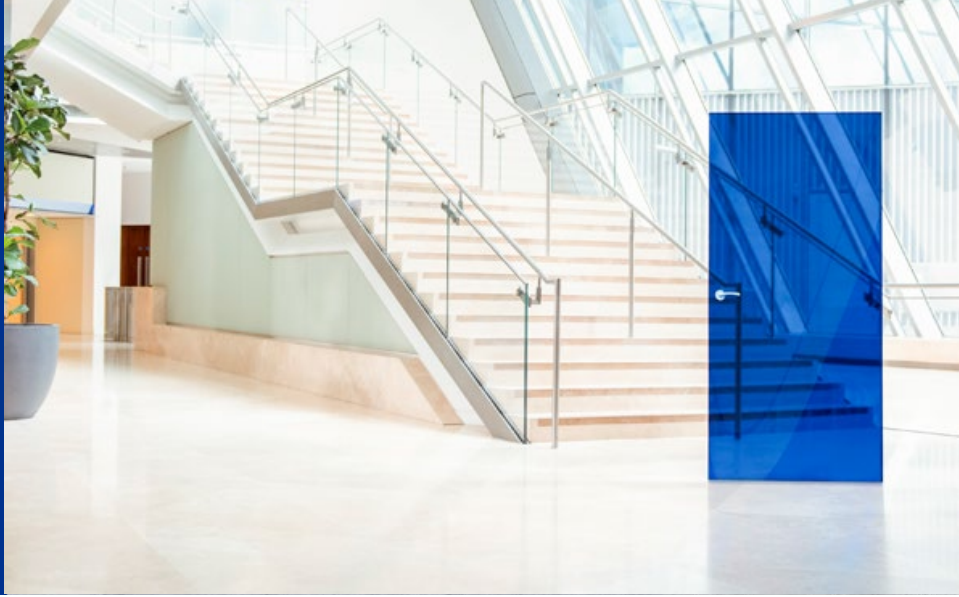




A conversation with John Amaechi OBE

KPMG Board Leadership Centre



Diversity and inclusion have probably never been higher on the agenda in business and in society at large, and maintaining momentum is now key. But what can businesses and boards proactively do to build more inclusive environments? John Amaechi OBE, respected organisational psychologist, best-selling New York Times author, sought after public speaker, executive coach and Founder of APS Intelligence Ltd, joined our Board Leadership Centre FTSE350 meeting to share his powerful, motivating - and challenging - views.

“I just want people to behave better. That’s what I want. It’s not a big demand.”

So said John Amaechi at our Board Leadership Centre meeting, with characteristic directness. It’s impossible to argue with, and all the more powerful given John’s formidable credentials for discussing and analysing diversity and inclusion, and their ugly opposites – discrimination, prejudice and bias. Few people are better qualified to talk about diversity and discrimination. And few talk about it more powerfully.

Race report

On the topic of the recent report of the Government’s Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, which has attracted some controversy in recent weeks, John didn’t spare any punches: “It’s bad scholarship,” he said. “That’s the most disappointing thing. It was easily avoidable too – so it was purposefully bad scholarship, which makes it dangerous. The report tries to focus on individual acts of malice rather than trying to understand institutional bias. It has disconnected racism from the systems and processes that have built up over many years.”

For all the progress that has been made in various ways over the years, John left the audience in no doubt that there is still a very significant way to go.

Abject misunderstanding

“There is still abject misunderstanding of blackness and ethnicity,” he said. “We [black people] are strangers to you. I am a stranger to you. Most white people don’t have black friends, or very few. More usually, they are colleagues you may have worked with on a project. Most white people don’t understand how much black and brown people have to negotiate their world to make white people more comfortable. In the UK, we essentially have apartheid in our living environments.”

John explained that while black and ethnic people go back to their areas after work, white people go to theirs meaning that in real terms, it’s still quite segregated.

This gulf is beginning to narrow somewhat, as John agreed, due to much greater levels of mixing between the younger generations. In this way, through their children and grandchildren, increased understanding is spreading within the over-50s too. It’s one positive that gives something to build on – as does the fact that diversity is so well established on corporate agendas.

“Businesses can and have played a huge role,” John observed. “This has been particularly powerful for the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and trans community. We see major businesses changing the colour of their logos during June (Pride month) and holding celebration events – it makes it accessible and fun and attracts new audiences, the majority of whom are not even LGBT.”

However, John qualified this by saying that “the same perspective has not been taken with race.” This just underlines the complexity of diversity and inclusion – because the experiences of different groups are so different. To really understand and tackle injustice, you need to be able to differentiate. This means, John said, that businesses have to be able to break down racial diversity into its constituent parts – as the experience of, for example, black Caribbean men is very different to African men.

The low-hanging fruit of policy and procedure

Investing in the tools to properly analyse and understand the landscape from a diversity and inclusion perspective is part of what John referred to as the ‘low-hanging fruit’ by which businesses can accelerate their progress. HR functions need to be able to gather data at a granular level across race, gender, social mobility and the intersections between them.

This is needed not least because ethnicity pay gap reporting is likely to become mandatory in addition to gender pay gap reporting in the future. Information on social mobility – which John said is set to become one of the government’s protected characteristics - is particularly hard to gather as individuals are often reluctant to give it.

Although there are some challenges, it is the sphere of policy and procedure that John regards as the simple part. Everything should be up for review: the use of assessment centres (“their efficacy is steadily falling”), personality and intelligence tests (“most of them are biased”), fixed distribution curves for remuneration and reward (“women, flexible workers, people with disabilities, those who are ‘visa-locked’ will always end up at the bottom of the curve”), and the use of the “same old recruiters” who keep on supplying “the same old people.”

One application method that John said had been shown to have an impact is ‘blind forms’ (as opposed to blind CVs that John did not believe work) where all personal markers are removed and which only ask for information that relates to the really key criteria for fulfilling the job role, rather than background information such as educational institutions attended etc.

Another mechanism for progress and change is quotas – even if John backs them reluctantly, as they make the individual promoted or appointed feel less sure or good about their progression.

Organisational ‘bunting’

Businesses need to think about every aspect of their brand, communications and interactions – and the messages they are giving off. John used a striking analogy for this:

“I have never been inside a pub with England flag bunting outside. I know not every such pub is racist or frequented by racists – but every time I’ve been racially abused walking past a pub, it’s been one with England bunting.

In the same way, what many businesses and boards don’t realise is that they are covered in bunting. So – what’s your organisational bunting, and what is it saying about you?”

Individual responsibility

Change will only come about through individual responsibility. Everyone – and leaders in particular – must make a difference.

John highlighted how we all have an opportunity to do something. For example, on a Teams or Zoom call when someone keeps trampling over the end of other people’s sentences – maybe a woman’s, or a junior staff member’s. By noticing transgressions we can do something about them straightaway, for example, by gently bringing the person spoken over, back in. Too often, people do or say nothing at the time and then send a sympathetic message afterwards. The subtext is then actually: ‘I noticed what happened. I did nothing about it. Please still think of me as a good person.’”

Such action is all part of looking out and caring for each other – something that John argued Covid-19 has made more essential than ever. “The era of the uncaring boss is over,” he said. “Covid-19 has eviscerated it. I don’t say that because I’m warm and fuzzy – it’s about winning. Caring businesses are more likely to win.”

Taking responsibility, calling out incivility, prejudice and bias wherever we see it, and standing up for fairness and equality – these are all of our individual obligations. From the many comments and questions that came through from attendees, John’s messages resonated strongly.

“As individuals, none of us can change the world but we all have a sphere of influence,” John concluded. “Use that to clear the area around you of injustice. Don’t assume the world knows where you stand. You have to tell the world where you stand. You have to say: ‘Here’s racism, sexism, bigotry, prejudice, in all its forms; and here’s me, on the other side. I’m not just hoping it goes away – I’m fighting it. I will not stand for it. Test me.’”

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