Recognising the biases within us - Alexia McClure

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Our Chief Operating Officier, Alexia McClure spoke with Ian Heath, Economic and Business correspondent at the Jersey Evening Post about how she feels organisations need to foster a culture where everyone can succeed.

Alexia explained how the fight for equality for women in the workplace has evolved over the years and how she feels organisations need to foster a culture where everyone can succeed.

With reports as recent as 2020 indicating that women occupy fewer than a third of the UK's top jobs, Alexia McClure feels that, despite progress over the decades, works still needs to be done to achieve equality.

She was clear that this was not just a women's issue – it's a matter for everyone – and having the right organisational culture is the solution.

'The answer is how do we all and how do organisations create and enable people to understand what is happening in the world around them, and how that is manifesting itself within their own organisation,' she said,

'How is the gender balance throughout the organization? How does any type of characteristic – such as ethnicity – look within an organization? Are there stages at which you can see that certain types of people are not progressing?

'Can you look at how jobs or projects are being dispersed through an organization and make sure that that's happening fairly? Can you make sure that when people come in and ask for your services, that you are treating them

all fairly?

‘The imperative here is to ensure that organisations look at themselves and the way they’re structured and the way they behave and make it as easy as possible or make a conscious effort to give people an equal chance.’

A key challenge Ms McClure identified was that of ‘unconscious bias’ – automatic judging of people due to certain characteristics.

‘It’s a prejudice, a stereotyping or a conclusion that you have about an individual that typically is not based on fact,’ she said.

‘It’s based on an inherent understanding of a particular characteristic. It is around how people behave towards one another or what conclusions you jump to when you meet, are in a room or are thinking about somebody.’

She added that unconscious bias was not just applied to the characteristic of gender.

‘Some of the unconscious bias examples could be when you make an assumption about someone because of their surname or because of the school that they go to,’ she said.

‘You suddenly think they went to this school, so they’ve got to be a managerial type or they went to that school, so they’ve not got a chance. Or they are a young woman and therefore they’re unlikely to be a brain surgeon.

‘You make a snap decision about somebody and that manifests itself in how you behave towards them, such as when you are in a meeting and the woman or the person who is not in the majority gets spoken over, or doesn’t get a chance to speak.

‘Women can get described as aggressive, or as fragile, for example. Those types of things are unconscious biases and quite often, people don’t really know that they’re making those leaps. Women get affected by that in recruitment and in promotion by this.’

Ms McClure said that the first step organisations can take to address the issue is acknowledging it exists.

‘The important thing is you don’t pretend that it doesn’t happen. We all have to

recognise that we have biases within us,' she said.

'What training needs to do is to help uncover when that's happening. If you are more conscious of what is happening to you or what's happening to somebody else in a similar situation, then you can address that situation.'

She added that resolution of the issue was something that would be to the benefit of all.

'Every individual has experiences in their lives and in their working lives where they might feel uncomfortable or they might feel that they are not being fairly treated, so everybody has to deal with that,' she said.

'Organisations need to be aware of how they are setting themselves up and the environment that they're creating to try and overcome some of these unconscious biases and to be mindful that these things exist.

'So it's not to pretend that it doesn't exist, but to say, okay, it is likely that we are all carrying around some sort of a bias. How do we help our people and how do we ensure that our processes minimise the impact of these biases, so that everyone gets a fair chance?'