Uncovering hidden cultures in workplaces can help make businesses more inclusive

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Companies should introduce ways of uncovering informal hidden cultures to create more inclusive workplaces, a social mobility expert has told parliamentarians.

Professor Anna Mountford Zimdars, Director of the University of Exeter's Centre for Social Mobility, gave evidence to the All-Party Parliamentary Corporate Responsibility Group on how businesses can promote social mobility.

She said: "Informal cultures can be lovely and create a sense of inclusion and belonging to an organization and a shared vision. However, it is detrimental to fair and open opportunities if this is the space where career entry and progression are negotiated and forged and if playing to 'hidden' and 'unarticulated' norms is crucial for success.

"It can also foster self-deselection into progression opportunities as not for 'people like me.' Unhiding hidden processes and having diverse role models so that people see 'people like them' being successful and mentoring are strategies to counter this."

Professor Mountford Zimdars also said companies should support social mobility because it will improve their business, as well as for moral reasons.

She said: "You may work in an environment where there is agreement that social mobility is a good thing, but if you need to build a case, this case can be supported by social justice and moral arguments as well as by business arguments. With unemployment currently at a record low and people rethinking their work-live balances, there is a business case for being that company where those who wish can succeed."

Professor Mountford Zimdars said companies should take two other practical steps to support social mobility. They should get to know staff and monitor and measure staff profiles, identifying room for improvement if necessary. This will require dedicating staff time and resources to this staff, and internal governance structures for reporting and action.

Professor Mountford Zimdars said: "Ideally this investigation is not just driven by the good will of particular individuals but a structurally embedded learning process of continuous investigation, reflection, action based on a theory of change, review and hopefully celebrating success."

Firms should also start conversations about what talent in their organization means—the skills and attributes staff need to get posts and be successful.

Professor Mountford Zimdars said: "Are all your criteria for success aligned to what your organization is about? Are some tainted by background? Are some systematically easier to meet for some people than for others? Could some be opened up? Are you missing out on talent? Are you not harvesting hidden skills that you don't even know could be useful to your organization? Could some skills and attributed be acquired on the job rather than being a criterion for entry?

"Ideally, this interrogation of what talent or merit means is championed by senior staff and supported from bottom-up processes. Co-creation and co-ownership of this agenda will be helpful. This process is likely to involve challenging existing norms and may require anonymous or otherwise facilitated open and frank debate."

Provided by University of Exeter