Wicked solutions enable diversity

"Why is change so hard?"

It's a question we commonly get asked by clients frustrated that their efforts to create a more diverse and inclusive workforce are not achieving any substantial change.

Our response is that creating a diverse workforce and unlocking the benefits of that diversity is a wicked problem, which in the words of author Keith Grint is:

"Complex, rather than just complicated ... there is no stopping point, it is novel ... any apparent 'solution' often generates other 'problems' and there is no right or wrong answer but there are better or worse alternatives."

Wicked problems require wicked solutions, not tame solutions that only address the symptoms of the problem not the root cause or causes.

But sometimes the most effective solutions are the ones hardest to come by.

Take the infamous story about the truck driver who got his vehicle lodged under a low bridge. He couldn't drive forward, nor could he reverse so his truck became hopelessly stuck and caused a massive traffic jam which resulted in a group of experts – emergency personnel, engineers, firefighters, and other truck drivers gathering together to try and find a solution to free his vehicle.

The experts were debating whether to dismantle parts of the truck or chip away at the bridge to loosen the truck. Each spoke of the solution based on their respective areas of experience and knowledge.

A boy walking by witnessed the debate and then said nonchalantly "why not just let the air out of the tyres?" To the absolute amazement of all the gathered experts, the solution was tested, the truck was able to drive free with ease and the bridge suffered only minor damage.

So, what's the moral of the story, effective solutions are the hardest to achieve because of the self-imposed constraints we work within in organisations and the difficulty for humans to challenge our assumptions and everyday knowledge influenced by our conscious and unconscious biases.

We naturally develop patterns of thinking that are modelled on the repetitive activities and commonly accessed knowledge which allows us to rely on building patterns of thinking to not have to learn everything from scratch every day.

Where inclusion and diversity initiatives typically fail in organisations, is when they've been designed with little insight or real understanding of the needs and lived experiences of the target employee demographic. Or they have been rushed to be delivered with very little questioning or testing of assumed knowledge and true identification of problems.

Our approach to inclusion and diversity consulting, is to help our clients build curiosity, empathy and questioning into how they design and implement inclusion and diversity programs and initiatives. Wherever possible, we encourage an evidence-based approach.

One of the most impactful processes that we utilise to help clients identify solutions to increase employee diversity is Design thinking because it taps into our capacity for empathy and curiosity, things that are usually overlooked by more conventional problem-solving practices.

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