

Abbellard Business Innovation is a South African based organisation that provides advisory services to companies that want to ensure a more gender balanced environment so as to improve their competitiveness.

Abbellard was approached by one of South Africa's top five law firms which expressed a need to explore the theme of gender balance in the organisation. Abbellard approached the project in two phases. Firstly, in order for Abbellard to gain a better understanding of the staff perception of the environment, and to establish whether they believed that the firm is gender balanced or not, Abbellard conducted several one hour individual interviews using their bespoke questionnaire. Interviews took place with 22 employees based in both Johannesburg and Cape Town who occupied positions in mid to senior manager levels in both professional and operational positions.

After collating and analysing the interview responses, Abbellard designed the next stage of the process so as to address the needs that had emerged from the interview results. A four-hour workshop, with a maximum of 20 participants per session, evolved from the findings. The process was designed around academic rigour based on transformational processes. In addition, in consultation together with four ORSC coaches, the Lands Work tool was used as the supporting framework, underpinned by Arnold Mindell's work on rank, power and privilege. Lands Work is an ORSC tool that encourages people to physically inhabit others perspectives and experiences. This process encourages all voices in a group to be heard; it creates a platform for conversation and for other's perspectives to be understood, appreciated and not judged. The workshops enabled men and women to share their individual personal experiences of what it is like to be a man or woman working in the organisation; the objective being not to defend or blame but simply to allow others to hear different perspectives.

The aims of each workshop were to enable a deeper appreciation of the diversity of gender and race experiences in order to facilitate the creation of a future of inclusiveness. The desire was for each workshop to conclude with participants agreeing on and committing to initial high-level next step actions to be taken, for the purpose of building a sustainable and inclusive firm of choice for the future.

Attendance at the workshops was voluntary; however members of the executive were actively encouraged to attend as the issue of gender representation is an important item on the firm's strategic agenda. The demographic make-up of workshop attendees was important so that there was an opportunity for all voices within the firm to be represented; i.e. balanced representation between gender, race, seniority and area of expertise.

Eleven workshops were held in Johannesburg and Cape Town, with a total of 165 participants. Each workshop was facilitated by a pair of facilitators; each pair being racially and gender diverse. On conclusion of each workshop, each participant was asked to provide feedback on the different perspectives experienced. The commonly recurring themes were 1) the power of shared experience was valuable; 2) surprise at the opposite gender's lived experiences; 3) appreciation of everyone's willingness to listen and engage meaningfully with tough topics; 4) recognition that racial, gender and age diversity all impact everyone's experience within the firm.

It was liberating and very informative to hear the diverging perspectives from participants. It certainly opened my eyes and awareness levels to hear these first-hand and to experience the emotion in many cases. These perspectives and views must be given "air time" if we want to be an inclusive working environment.

It's been very refreshing to hear different perspectives expressed honestly and openly and to see shifts in attitudes of the listeners

This was an amazing, emotional experience. As a young female professional, I finally feel that people are starting to take a stance about these issues and to do something about it.

The workshops were concluded by enabling small group discussions in which participants focused on action: for self, team and the organisation. Post workshops, these actions were collated and used in discussion with the executive when consulting on the organisation's next steps. The organisation has subsequently started implementing some of the different recommendations that emerged from the workshops.

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