

UNCORKING EQUITY

Rethinking EDI in Wine and Hospitality

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EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION (EDI)

have become familiar fixtures in industry vocabulary, particularly in wine and hospitality. Panels are convened, pledges are signed, and strategic plans are published, often with the best of intentions. Yet despite these efforts, there remains a fundamental misunderstanding of what **EDI truly involves**.

Too often, it is **reduced to a numbers game, representation without systemic change, diversity without belonging**.

I've spent over two decades in hospitality, both on executive boards and as a consultant. I now run **Be Inclusive Hospitality**, a social enterprise focused on accelerating race equity in this sector. During the five years of Be Inclusive Hospitality, I've encountered the same recurring misconception: that **diversity alone equals progress**. But the reality is more nuanced and more uncomfortable. If inclusion isn't embedded as a cultural foundation, **then diversity becomes performative, precarious, and short-lived**.

This article **is not a call-out, but a call-in**, an invitation for industry leaders to dig deeper. To rethink EDI not as a compliance exercise, but as a genuine commitment to real, lasting transformation. This kind of transformation has been **proven to positively impact employee wellbeing, talent attraction and retention, and overall business performance**, so I lead with the question,

WHY
WOULDN'T
YOU?



THE PARADOX AT THE HEART OF EDI

Let's start with a fundamental question: does diversity drive inclusion, or must inclusion be established first for diversity to thrive?

In practice, most organisations pursue diversity as the starting point. They focus on increasing representation, be it through **diverse hiring, diversifying supply chains, or initiatives aimed at attracting new talent from underrepresented communities**. But this can be akin to inviting guests to a party without checking whether they feel welcome once they arrive.

INCLUSION MUST COME FIRST.

Inclusion is an active, intentional effort, it's not simply about who is present. It's about how people feel. Think about it: what shapes our experience in the workplace?

Recognition, fair reward, opportunities for growth, healthy leadership, and strong peer relationships all play a vital role.

When inclusion isn't prioritised, diverse talent will enter the industry, but they won't stay. **No one chooses to remain in environments that fail to meet these fundamental needs.**

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS STILL STANDING

Over the past few years, **Be Inclusive Hospitality** has published several reports that expose the enduring inequalities in our industry.

In our **Inside Hospitality research**, we found that ethnically diverse professionals **continue to face discrimination in pay, progression, and access to opportunities**.

The wine sector remains one of the least representative from **an ethnicity perspective, in positions of influence, ownership, and general visibility**.

Structural barriers often operate quietly: **rigid recruitment routes, bias in hiring and promotion, lack of transparency in pay, and limited access to professional networks**. These are embedded in the fabric of many organisations, which is why **EDI requires more than standalone workshops or ad hoc mentoring schemes**.

What's needed is a dismantling of inequitable systems and a rebuilding around **fairness, empathy, and accountability**. And that starts at the top.



THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP



A common mistake I've observed among many hospitality operators over the past five years is **delegating EDI solely to the People Team or Diversity Committees.**

The truth is, for it to be effective, **it must be championed by all leaders, owners, managing directors and general managers.** The tone of company culture, including which behaviours are acceptable or not, is always set from the top.

There are often numerous internal indicators that can reveal where attention is needed, and **data can play a crucial role** in helping you understand the current landscape.

DO YOU KNOW

who occupies senior roles in your business, and how that breakdown compares across gender, race, and other demographics?

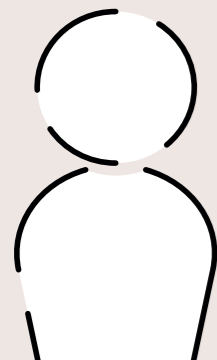
DO YOU TRACK

pay equity?

DO YOU HAVE

clear routes to progression for all employees, not just those with cultural capital or confidence?

Without honest reflection and leadership buy-in, even the most well-intentioned efforts will struggle to take root.



PRACTICAL ACTIONS IN TOUGH TIMES

We are living in a time of **economic uncertainty, rising costs, and workforce shortages.** Some businesses may feel that **EDI is a "nice to have"** that must wait until more prosperous times.

I WOULD ARGUE THE OPPOSITE

I would also hazard a guess that two key areas of focus for any business are maintaining and ideally increasing revenue, while attracting the brightest and best talent to drive business success.

EDI is an enabler for both: helping to broaden your customer base and expand the talent pool you are currently reaching.

That said, this must be approached with genuine intent and the right mindset; if done poorly or without authenticity, it can come across as performative and **risk doing more harm than good.**

Embedding inclusion **doesn't always require a huge budget,**

IT REQUIRES INTENTION.



FIVE ACTIONS LEADERS CAN TAKE TODAY TO BE INCLUSIVE:

1. COLLECT EMPLOYEE DATA

Engagement surveys are a useful tool for understanding overall employee wellbeing.

Use them as an opportunity to gather information about the identities represented within your workforce.

Understanding who is in your team is essential to enable inclusion.

2. REVIEW LOCAL DIVERSITY

Public data is freely available online. **Compare the demographics of your business location with those of your workforce.** What story does the data tell? Are there gaps or disparities between your current workforce and the local community?

3. CREATE A CULTURE & INCLUSION CALENDAR:

Use your workforce insights to ensure all leaders are aware of key cultural and religious dates that may impact their teams. This allows **for proactive planning and fosters inclusion-led leadership.**

4. EDUCATE YOURSELF

We live in an age of abundant information. There are credible resources available on every topic, from books and podcasts to documentaries. **Invest time in learning and be honest about your blind spots.**

5. REFLECT AND STRATEGISE

Use the insights gained from steps 1-4 to shape a considered, realistic strategy. Focus on what needs to change and map out **a plan to make that change happen.**

These steps are an important start, but they create ripples. **And ripples, sustained over time, can change tides.**

THE TIME IS NOW

There is a tendency in this industry to wait for perfection – the right campaign, the right language, the right moment. **But when it comes to equity, the time is always now.**

To uncork equity is **to be open to new stories, new voices, and new ways of working.**

It is to recognise that inclusion is not a destination but a daily practice.

And perhaps most importantly, **it is to understand that in the world of hospitality, where every plate served and every door opened carries the potential to connect, it is not enough to invite difference in. We must ensure that all people feel as if they belong.**

Lorraine Copes is a multi-award-winning social entrepreneur, coach, and founder of Be Inclusive Hospitality CIC, established in 2020 to tackle racial inequity in hospitality. A former executive director for top brands like Gordon Ramsay Restaurants, she now serves on the WSTA board and judges awards including Great Taste and Veuve Clicquot's Bold Woman Awards. Recognised by GQ, Condé Nast Traveller, and NatWest WISE100, Lorraine is a leading voice driving lasting change across food, drink, and hospitality.

