

Black Lives Matter: tackling racism in the workplace

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The international outcry following the recent tragic death of George Floyd in the United States has dominated the news and social media in recent months. Here in the UK, thousands of people took part in large demonstrations across the country, with many of them taking a knee in solidarity with anti-racism movements. Many corporations and institutions across the world have confirmed their support for the Black Lives Matter movement and have committed to addressing inequality in their workplace. This is a positive step for race relations across the globe and all employers, big and small, should renew their commitment to tackling all forms of discrimination at work and elsewhere.

So, what should dental employers do right now? Talk to your employees and acknowledge what is happening. The global demonstrations have shown that thousands of individuals from all backgrounds care passionately about equality and human rights. It is crucial that the events taking place are not ignored or swept under the carpet. Staff may feel moved or distressed by the news coverage and for BAME staff they may be dealing with painful memories of discrimination that have resurfaced. It is understandable that some managers might feel uncomfortable talking about an emotive issue like racism or may be unsure of what they can and cannot say, however, it is imperative that these important conversations are had so that staff feel supported and recognised. Staying silent could send the wrong message, particularly to BAME staff who could lose trust and

confidence in their managers if they feel they do not care about tackling racism.

Before any discussion, it would be sensible to review your Equal Opportunities Policy and ensure that it is up to date and covers all forms of discrimination. Your policy should include a statement of the practice's commitment to equal opportunities and make it clear that all employees are respected to act in accordance with the policy. It should set out the various forms of discrimination covered by the Equality Act. Details of how complaints will be investigated should be included together with the possible sanctions, such as disciplinary action and dismissal.

At your next staff meeting, you should remind staff about the policy and use the opportunity to have a broader discussion on the importance of challenging racism and inequality in the workplace, referencing the principles behind the Black Lives Matter movement. Staff could be given a copy of the policy in advance and their feedback invited. A senior manager should attend the meeting and emphatically confirm that the practice is committed to tackling racism in the workplace. They should reaffirm that all employees will be treated with dignity and respect regardless of their background or ethnicity. Staff should be reminded that they should raise with management any concerns they have about discrimination or harassment and given strong reassurances that the matter will be treated seriously and investigated. A manager responsible for the policy should guide staff on its contents and stress that any breach of it could lead to disciplinary action and dismissal. This will raise awareness among your employees and make clear what is considered unacceptable and unlawful behaviour. It would be a good idea to highlight that discussions about religion and politics may lead to misunderstandings and that 'friendly banter' may cause offence.

Overall, the key message for staff to take away from the meeting is that the practice has

a zero-tolerance approach to racism and that promoting a culture of tolerance and respect is one of your core values. Employees should be invited to provide comments on what the practice could do to address discrimination generally, either at the meeting or in writing afterwards, with confidentiality always ensured.

Consideration should be given to providing external training to staff, in particular for managers and those responsible for recruitment, on equality and diversity issues in the workplace. A lot of this training can be carried out online if it is not practical to do it in person.

The main law that covers discrimination at work is the Equality Act 2010, which provides that it is unlawful to discriminate against anyone because of their race. Race includes colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin. Discrimination can include not hiring someone or selecting a particular person for redundancy. You are responsible for discrimination carried out by your employees unless you can show that you had done everything you reasonably could have to prevent or stop it. If you receive a complaint of discrimination, employers should treat the matter very seriously and listen carefully and with empathy to what the employee says. Complaints should be investigated thoroughly, and disciplinary procedures used where warranted. Any inaction by an employer could damage staff morale and result in an employment tribunal claim.

Deeds, not words, is key. Employers have the power to influence their staff and be a real force for change in these challenging times. Tackling racism should always be part of the agenda.

BDA Expert members have access to a model Equal Opportunities policy template. For further information visit www.bda.org/advice ♦

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