



Equality in the Company: Social and Managerial Innovation

- Format** 90 minute workshop at the Lalive law firm
- Location** Genève
- Output** Value mapping of quality across different company situations
Mapping of possible measures to be taken for each situation
- Follow-Up** Developing methods for implementing equality as a value
Follow-up workshop with experts

«LALIVE is proud to lead the way in promoting gender equality: 30% of our partners are women, one of whom is co-director of the firm, and half of the senior managers are women. Our wish is to go even further. We thank Johan for helping us progress in this direction.»
Noradèle Radjai, Associate Partner

The law firm Lalive is known internationally with offices in Genoa, Zurich, and London. With extensive experience in international matters, its particular expertise lies in the field of dispute litigation. The firm has made gender issues within its teams a strategic priority that reflects the wider commitment towards equality. The firm prides itself on having more than 30% female partners, a figure well above the industry average. As part of their discussions, the firm invited ethix to hold a workshop with some forty employees at all levels, including partners and managers.

A question of innovation ethics

The issue of equality (with a focus on gender equality) is hereby treated as an issue of innovation ethics. While the value of equality is not new in itself, its definition and societal scope have seen large changes in the last decades. Equality has gained societal managerial and political momentum and a transformation of many social practices with regard to equality can be observed. It is the strengthening of equality as a core value which is promoting a social innovation process. This workshop demonstrated that the strengthening of values has many effects on the company's operations and, more generally, on society as a whole. Like technological innovations, social innovation is also not neutral. It questions our vision of coexistence and forces us to question even our most-taken-for-granted social practices.

The veil of ignorance: a life-size ethical experience

The workshop was organized in 3 stages: (i) ethical framing through a thought experiment, (ii) identification of keywords and situations directly related to the value of equality, (iii) group work tackling these different situations and discussing possible mechanisms for putting the value of equality into practice.

Workshop participation was contextualized based on experiencing the "veil of ignorance" developed by J. Rawls in his book «A Theory of Justice.» Participants are invited to take part in a sort of 'general assembly' whose aim is to identify the foundational principles of the company's operations. However, the assembly takes place under special conditions: participants are told to ignore everything about their own identity, function, and competence within the company. They discuss the organization of the company and make decisions under a «veil of ignorance»: They do not know if they have a junior/senior position, what types of work they do, or whether they are male or female.

According to J. Rawls, this situation creates a situation of radical equality among participants. Everyone participates in the debate, while having potentially any role within the company. The workshop becomes a life-size ethical exercise and each situation can be addressed through the following test question: under the veil of ignorance condition, would I be willing to accept this rule/practice?

Identify situations where equality is at stake

The second stage, the discussion, was started with an open-ended question aimed at identifying a «universe of values» around the issue of equality. Participants were invited to propose values, principles, and beliefs related to the value of equality. About twenty keywords were defined - these served as the standard for the upcoming discussion. Examples include: «transparency,» «fairness,» «empathy,» «collaboration,» «creativity». If equality is important for a company, the keywords mentioned are likely to play a decisive role.

On the basis of this «universe of values,» participants sought to identify situations from their professional lives where these keywords are at stake. Quickly, 19 situations were identified as being relevant from an equality perspective. These situations covered a wide range of issues dealing with recruitment, promotion, allocation of different tasks and missions, but also possible clothing or parental leave policies. This phase produced rich discussions that clearly highlighted the transversal scope of the equality value, which has an impact on all organizational practices. Utilizing the veil of ignorance technique is particularly useful for identifying potentially problematic situations.

An example: strengthening mentoring practices Representation / Equality

Participants' main task was to identify why certain situations create tension or are problematic. Once these elements were identified, they could sketch out proposals for solutions.

One group, for example, was interested in analyzing the practice of mentoring under the perspective of equality. Mentoring new employees is seen as a promising tool for promoting equality, both for individuals and for the company as a whole. Two steps were specified to include equality in mentoring activities: In a first step, mentors could meet to identify structural barriers and exchange best practices with regard to equality. Having a diverse group of mentors would ensure that a broader set of barriers and best practices is singled out. The second step would be to spread the identified good practices throughout the company through direct mentoring work.

In line with these findings, a potential follow-up to the held workshop would be to cooperate with mentors to help them identify their own equality blind spots. Such a follow-up could make it possible to implement ethical considerations in the company's procedures and to offer continuous training to the most experienced members.

Innovation ethics for the firm

In general, offering space and time for ethical debates within a team makes it possible to achieve two main objectives:

First, team spirit and coherence are strengthened by working together to define, identify, and implement values. The exercise reinforces everyone's sense of being part of a coherent project. Second, the joint debate facilitates the strengthening of the value of equality in all parts of the company. This managerial, social, and cultural innovation can lead to profound changes in the way people work within the company. An open and participatory ethical debate is an effective tool to support these changes.

ethix – Lab for Innovation Ethics is made possible by Engagement Migros, the development fund of the Migros Group.

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About Engagement Migros

Engagement Migros supports pioneering projects in the midst of social change that break new ground and test future-oriented solutions. The impact-oriented funding approach combines financial support with coaching-like services in the pioneer lab. The development fund was founded in 2012 as a voluntary commitment by the companies of the Migros Group. With its independent approach, Engagement Migros supplements the funding activities of the Migros Culture Percentage.

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