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Jim Bentley Opinion Piece

THE VALUE OF EMBRACING DIVERSITY

With International Women's Day and Harmony Day so close to each other, and in the wake of recent tragic events in Christchurch, it's a particularly important time to come together in unity and harmony. It's great to hear a lot of business leaders talking about diversity and inclusion. Many organisations appear genuinely to value the benefits that a diverse team can bring to their performance, and the wider social outcomes achieved by contributing to a fairer world.

Towards the end of last year I was impacted strongly by listening to Sue Murphy, the then CEO of Water Corporation in Western Australia, say that if we want to achieve more diversity, leaders should be focusing on creating inclusive organisations where people from a diverse range of backgrounds, and with different experiences, beliefs, cultures and preferences will thrive and feel comfortable to succeed in.

I grew up in the UK at a time when few marriages ended in separation. My parents separated when I was quite young and my mother married a wonderful Sri Lankan man who taught me things that I value to this day, including to love cricket! But I remember what it felt like to be laughed at by kids at school because I came from a split home and because of the colour of my step dad's skin. Perhaps this is why I have always hated racism in any form and why I hate the thought that anyone would feel like they don't belong, or that they are unable to reach their potential because they are different.

Before moving to Australia I lived in New Zealand for 10 years and I like to think I learnt a lot from my Maori friends and colleagues. Earlier in my life, I spent four years in Istanbul where I was one of the very few westerners in my workplace and in the community I lived in.

It is because of my personal experiences that I care so passionately about diversity and inclusion. To achieve diversity, we must foster a culture of inclusiveness where people thrive and feel they belong. Not only will this enable better performance of our staff and organisation, and help create a fairer society, but it is simply the right thing to do.

Women and men play equally important roles in the growth and direction of Hunter Water. I'm pleased to say that 40 per cent of our board and executive team is now made up of women. While I recognise it is not equal yet, it is a step in the right direction. At Hunter Water, we have recently put in place a number of initiatives to help address imbalance and to provide signals to our organisation about how important equality and inclusivity is to us.

We are co-sponsoring more female employees than any other participating organisation in the University of Newcastle's Women in MBA program. This initiative aims to equip women with the leadership skills and strategic perspectives needed to help them move into senior positions. Last year we also implemented our first women's mentoring program, focused on developing communication skills and building confidence among our current and aspiring female leaders.

While achieving gender equality is important, we are also committed to creating equal opportunities for all members of our community including Indigenous Australians, LGBTIQ+ people, as well as those with different abilities and cultural backgrounds.

We are in the process of developing a Reconciliation Action Plan to build stronger relationships with our Indigenous employees and community members, and our people leaders are undergoing training to address their unconscious biases. Outside of our organisation, we are supporting Indigenous education scholarships, an annual Undergraduate Disability Scholarship and are helping mentor young girls in STEM subjects through the HunterWiSE program. We will continue to invest and support these initiatives, and more, as we work to improve equity.

I believe that workplaces must actively nurture and foster an inclusive culture in order to produce the strongest teams and deliver the best outcomes. I feel fortunate to work with a board which shares my passion for achieving diversity and inclusion, and for the strong direction it is providing to our organisation. Encouraging and embracing diversity is not only good for business, but it's the right thing to do for our employees and our community.

JIM BENTLEY
Managing Director, Hunter Water