Beyond the barriers
Episode 2: Inclusion in leadership | English transcript

Sarika: Hello everyone. We are back with an all-new episode of our series, *Beyond the Barriers*, where we explore how inclusion removes obstacles and creates pathways to opportunity, not only in workspaces but also across society. In this episode, we are talking about inclusion and leadership within organizations and beyond.

Together, we'll take a look at how we can challenge bias and perception gaps, move beyond the barriers to empower talent regardless of who they are, and work together to shape a more inclusive generation of future leaders

I'm your host, Sarika Naik. I lead corporate responsibility globally at Capgemini. I've always strongly believed that everyone deserves equal opportunities in the workplace, not just for employees, but especially for leaders. I'm truly excited to talk about this topic with our guests here today. Joining me is Amy Smith, Chief Data Officer with the UK Civil Government. Virginia Illera from ONCE Foundation, and Matteo Winkler, who is the Academic Director of HEC Paris

Would you all like to say hello to our listeners? Aimee, maybe you'd like to start.

Aimee: Yeah, really happy to, and can I just say I'm really happy to be talking to you today. It's a genuine pleasure. So my name is Aimee Smith. I'm the UK Government Chief Data Officer. I've worked in public sector for 26 years and for the last 10 months, that has been in charge of all of government data and the public sector, which is one of the most stretching yet exciting jobs I think I've ever done.

Sarika: Glad you could join us, Amy. Virginia, how about you?

Virginia: Firstly, hello. It's a privilege to talk to you. I'm Virginia Carcedo. I'm from Spain, and I'm General Secretary of Fundación ONCE, and also the Director of Transformation, Excellence, and Equality for Fundación ONCE.

Sarika: Thank you for being here today, Virginia. And Matteo, if you could introduce yourself to our listeners, please?

Matteo: Sure. My name is Matteo Winkler. I am a professor in the law and tax department at HEC Paris. And in HEC Paris, I'm also the academic director of the L3M1 of the Grande École program, which is part of the masters management.

Sarika: Thank you. It's so exciting to have all of you here.

Aimee, I'd like to start with you. Aimee, you've had such an inspiring journey as a leader in data and intelligence. First, like you said, with the UK Metropolitan Police, and now with the civil government. In one of your interviews, you'd also mentioned you wanted to be an actor.

Aimee: I did

Sarika: you did? But life took you in completely another direction, and today you are the chief data officer of the UK government. That's quite something. Can you tell us a little bit about your journey and what inspired you to build a career and specialize in data analysis?

Aimee: Yeah. So Sarika, it's important to say that if Hollywood asks, I will answer. And the reason I'm not an actress is because, and important from an inclusivity point of view, I was the first person in my family to go to university.

So my background and how I came into that was I always knew, from a young age that if I couldn't be an actress, I'd want to go into policing.

And so I decided that my degree, which was in criminology, I'd be better placed in intelligence analysis, and that's exactly what I applied for in 2001, and my career started as an intelligence analyst in the Metropolitan Police Service. A whole variety of exciting jobs.

Sarika: Sounds so intelligent.

Aimee: I know. It sounds intelligent.

Sarika: Sorry to interrupt you but so intelligent.

Aimee: I don't know if I was or I wasn't, but I absolutely loved it. So that was about identifying patterns of crime, groups of offenders, and helping operational police officers to plan proactive operations to prevent crime happening or to stop major criminals taking part in all sorts of things.

I worked on everything from drug offending, child abuse, human trafficking. It was just so exciting.

Sarika: Wow.

Aimee: I'd been in intelligence for 15 years, and I'd worked my way up to be senior. I was the first member of police staff to be in charge of covert intelligence, and that's essentially like, you know, listening to criminals, bugging their cars, intercepting their phone calls.

And I met quite a lot of resistance for that, but it was, a great operational job. But I got pregnant and went off on maternity leave. And when I came back nine months later, they'd given that job to a police officer.

A male police officer, I hasten to add. I had no job to do.

And thankfully, Cressida Dick, who was the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Service at that point, understood the power of data.

So I leaned into being the SRO for that program and then I ended up being the director of data in the Met. What a great opportunity to have been given and, but to be honest, it wouldn't have happened if they hadn't given like some terrible inclusive behavior from the organization itself.

Sarika: Absolutely. No, thank you for sharing with us, and I can also relate to some of it. I had a similar experience more related to not being included. I had been brought on as a board member, and back then I was one of the two women leaders on the board.

And during the very first meeting when we walked into that room, you won't believe this, Aimee, but everyone looked around and laughed and joked loudly. And as soon as I opened the door and walked in, one of the senior leaders looked at me and the other woman leader with me and said, "Oh, here come the diversity candidates."

Aimee: Oh, you're joking me

Sarika: I was speechless, and I didn't even know what to say.

Aimee: Out loud? Flipping heck.

Sarika: Maybe today I have a few words to give them, but on that day I was speechless.

I realize they didn't mean to offend me, but we often deal with that kind of bias, and that's what gender equality brings to the table when women are treated as equals instead of looking at them as exceptions or requiring special treatment.

So Virginia, coming back to you. You're a powerful advocate for disability inclusion and have also been recognized globally. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself, your journey, how it began, and about ONCE Foundation and what the foundation is trying to do in Spain?

Virginia: Of course. I will begin by saying that my journey has never been only an individual one. It is a part of a much broader collective movement for rights, equal opportunities, and social transformation.

As Fundación ONCE, working alongside people with disabilities and their representative organizations also transformed my understanding of leadership. Very important, I think it's a key aspect, I learned to listen before designing to work with people rather than for them, and to recognize lived experience as a form of expertise.

Virginia: Fundación ONCE has worked since 1988, yeah, more than 30 years to advance the full social inclusion of people with disabilities and to make equality of opportunity a reality, you know.

Around two-thirds of our budget is devoted to employment and training because for me, employment is much more than receiving a salary.

Sarika: Yes, yes

Virginia: I would like to highlight two programs I think illustrate my approach particularly, you know. First is Por Talento Emprende for talent and entrepreneur, entrepreneurship, to support people with disabilities who want to create their own business.

And the second project is Por Talento, Digital Por Talento, - For Talent Digital Project. It's our offline learning program in digital skills and technological professional.

And at the same time, we help companies as Capgemini, because we have an agreement with you, analyze jobs, identifying the skills they generally need, make recruitment accessible, provide tailored training, support onboarding, and introduce reasonable adjustment to in the company, you know.

Inclusivity is not about lowering the bar. It is about removing the barriers that prevents talented people from reaching it. No imagine if you are not part of your process of inclusion.

Sarika: I couldn't agree more, and this is so impressive, Virginia. I love the part where you said inclusion is not about lowering the bar, but it's removing the barriers that prevent talented people from reaching it. People with disabilities are just as capable and must have access to the same opportunities as everyone else.

At Capgemini, we have been making some progress as well by taking active steps to make our recruitment processes accessible to everyone.

For example, in Brazil, candidates with disabilities are provided with sign language assistance whenever they need it. We also train our talent acquisition teams to make sure that the candidates are selected based on their skills and experiences.

I realise that it's a complex journey, but we are committed to building a more supportive workplace for people with disabilities

So Matteo, we have discussed the importance of inclusive leadership in workspaces and society in general. But inclusion is a part of our everyday culture, and it all begins with education, where students can develop the skills needed to lead diverse teams and navigate complex global challenges as future leaders.

You've spent considerable years teaching students at HEC Paris. These are the same students who would become future executive leaders. Why would you say students should see inclusion as a core leadership capability?

Matteo: Mm. Inclusion is a must-have for organizations because it's the way they work. You cannot have organization where people are psychologically vulnerable. Everyone understands that even if you don't know how organizations work, you understand you cannot have a team where some people feel excluded.

So I teach my students to treat inclusion the way they treat negotiation or feedback, like something that can be taught, learned, practiced and evaluated.

Coming from the DEI course that I had last year. There was this student who felt a little bit an outcast in the classroom because she didn't share specific elements that other students took for granted regarding inclusiveness.

So, she had a kind of radical stance in the sense that she thought that DEI was useful, but up to a certain point, it was kind of oppressive.

So again, I approached this matter as a problem of design and not as a problem of individual behavior. So I wanted to make sure that her voice was heard by the class because I think it it's valuable to hear different voices as a matter of free speech. At the same time, I valued her uniqueness in terms of thought, but at the same time, I cared about belongingness, not only of herself, but of the whole class, to the fact that we are an education institution, we need to educate. We don't need to take political positions, but at the same time, we need to be sure that what we do is grounded in research.

Sarika: Very true Matteo. Inclusive learning environments help challenge stereotypes and unconscious biases at an early stage.

It's really interesting to see how you're encouraging your students to engage with different perspectives. Debate ideas respectfully, and solve real-world challenges together.

I think this definitely helps them become more creative and adaptable problem-solvers.

Aimee, let's move to you next.

I believe around 35% of Metropolitan Police force in the UK are women and even less in roles around data analysis. This trend is something we see actually across the globe almost everywhere, and across all industries, few women are pushing data science and analytics positions.

Looking back at your career, what kind of visible or invisible barriers did you face, and even today as a woman leader, and how do you navigate through these challenges?

Aimee: That statistic about policing is challenging, and I think,it matters, and it's hard when you don't have role models in organizations all the way up the chain.

I'll give you an example. Senior leadership is really hard, it's hard anyway, but you have to role model the things that the people on the ground have got, right?

My husband worked in national security. I was working as the director of data. We had no help locally, and when I got pregnant, it changed everything. And there was a day where, like, I had to have a keep in touch day. The keep in touch day was you must be in Scotland Yard at this time.

So the only way, I had to take my daughter, who was about, I dunno, 16 weeks, in a buggy, had to get her on a train to Earlsfield train station, where my husband was stationed at the nick there. And then he had to wait for the train to arrive. I pushed the buggy off as the doors shut, and I went off into London.

He wheeled her back to the police station and sat with her, and then when I'd finished, he wheeled her back to the train station and pushed her on the train that I was on. Literally, that was the only way we could manage our childcare on that day. So, a long-winded answer to your question. But I think being a parent and showing how hard it is, even at a senior

level, to then push for flexibility for people with, not just children, but other caring responsibilities is, is, I think is still a big challenge we've got to address

Sarika: Aimee, amazing. And I'm, I'm so happy you didn't give up, you know? I mean, there were challenges, and I can only imagine the kind of coordination you and your husband had to do to make sure that you both continue your very, you know, important careers.

Sarika: I strongly believe that supporting women in workforce isn't just a gender issue, it's linked to business growth as well. And if you, and if you want to ensure that we have the richest talent pool and drive most innovation, we need to have a more balanced workforce.

Aimee: Oh, for sure

Sarika: But referring to your experience, I think while organizations today need to offer practical support to mothers, but also for fathers. At Capgemini, for instance, fathers can avail of parental leave, and everyone is entitled to flexible working arrangements to help maintain a good work/life balance.

By the way, that was not, uh, available the years when I had my children by, you know, unfortunately. I'm based in India, and here we have FareWelcome, and that helps parents transition smoothly through not just during pregnancy, but also parental leave, and also while returning back to workplace. We are making progress.

I mean, I'm really proud of what we are doing.

Aimee: Right!

Sarika: So Virginia, you've long supported employees with disabilities to have access to management positions.

What kind of gaps and barriers do you see in organizations today when it comes to disability representation in leadership?

What are the top three things you would say organizations need to keep in mind to build a more inclusive workforce today and in the future?

Virginia: First, everybody says, "Oh, perhaps the gap is the regulation. We need more regulation. Oh, the gap is more sensitization." But from my point of view, the first gap and the most important gap is the gap of imagination.

We must begin with our skill, because I am, I'm person with disability. I am blind, no? We must begin with our skills, aspirations, and potential because we are people we have a white paper about disability diversity management, and this white paper found that only 12% of the companies mention having people with disabilities in senior management position.

Imagine. This not means that 12% of the companies senior, have senior managers who have disabilities in their staff. It means that only 12% of the companies, of the participating

companies, could identify disability representation at that level. Imagine. They have perhaps, but they don't know or they never imagine that people with disability can become, for example, a member of the governing board or a director of department, no?

The problem is not a shortage of talent. It is a shortage of accessible opportunities and a career pathway, no? Barriers can appear before, during, and after a person with disabilities can enter into a company, no? For example, job description with unnecessary requirements, digital tests that are incompatible. They also appear in the interview. Sometimes the interviewer focus more on the disability.

Sarika: Yeah, I've seen that. I've seen that many times. True

Virginia: When someone is hesitant to disclose a disability or request an adjustment, for example, it might be because previous experience have shown me that doing so can reduce their opportunities.

Imagine if you say I need a program and a screen reader. How you say, a company they don't want to adapt the position to me. Confidence is shaped by the environment. If you have an environment friendly with you, I think you have more opportunities.

And then there are barriers after recruitment, no? Reasonable adjustment may arrive too late, for example or leadership development programs may not be accessible.

The job should be adapted to the person needs without, we say before, lowering its professional standard.

First, I think move from labels to skills because organizations need to adopt a generally a skills-first approach, no?

A skill-first approach does not mean being disabled, blind, my case, no? It means seeing the person's abilities fairly while recognizing and removing the barriers associated with disability. Reasonable adjustment should not be regarded as an exceptional favor, no? It's important to understand that.

Second tip, from my point of view, is move from isolated initiative to an inclusive operating system. That means including disability in job design, recruitment, onboarding, technology, procurement, training, performance assessment, in every activities of the company because if not, a high-performance culture and inclusive culture is important are not opposites.

Sarika: Yes, absolutely, Virginia. What you mentioned about interviewers sometimes focusing more on a candidate's disability than their capabilities really resonated with me.

It takes me back to about 18 years ago when I was hiring a brand manager for my team. The recruitment team had set up an interview, but they didn't tell me that the candidate was a person with visual disability until I reached the office to meet him. I was a bit reluctant at first when they told me about it but I decided to go ahead since I was already there.

And I remember meeting him at the reception, I noticed that he had partial vision loss and he walked with a cane. He explained that he had a degenerative condition of 70% vision

loss and since it was genetic, he knew that he would lose his sight completely soon. You know, Virginia, I remember walking with him to the meeting room.

I expected to help guide him, to the place, but was really surprised to see him walk effortlessly on his own. He didn't miss a single step even though, you know, he didn't work at that office. So when we reached the meeting room, I asked him, I said, "How do you know this place?

And he told me that he had been there the previous day for another interview and he had actually counted the steps then. During the interview I was so impressed to see that he was proactive throughout the conversation. He wasn't desperate to settle for any role, but instead he asked me about the role that I had in my team.

I was really impressed to see he said, "I want to check if that role is a good fit for his skills and for his career plan." He was very clear that he didn't want favours and he believed in his capabilities.

Virginia, we created a role for him and he was such a wonderful addition for the team. We hired him, you know, on a new role that brought him on basis of his capabilities. And he was so good at his job that sometimes I used to forget that he had a visual disability. It was such a life-changing experience for me working with him.

How about we switch to you next, Matteo?

So Capgemini has been partners with HEC Paris for quite a few years now, I think more than four years. We have collaborated on the student challenges to encourage creative thinking around how organizations can respond to changing expectations around inclusion worldwide. Based on your interactions with students, what kind of impact have you seen coming out of these challenges?

Matteo: We have been collaborating with Capgemini for five years now, especially with the DEI team. And their work has been amazing, and they're super professional, and they really bring their knowledge…

Sarika: That's great to hear

Matteo: Yeah, with the ultimate goal, which is students learning. So what happens during the course is that they create a big question for the students to respond, and they divide this question into sub-questions, which are proposed to different teams.

So at the end of the course, in the, our last session, we go to Capgemini's offices, and students present their findings. And what makes a Capgemini partnership so valuable is that it closes the gap between the theory we studied in class and the workplace practices. Our students arrive already primed for this conversation because most of them have already worked, many during a year, a gap year, and for a good number of them internationally.

So they bring real experience to the classroom, and my role is to lead them toward the theory. At the same time, with the partnership with Capgemini, we add concreteness to the course. With the ultimate goal, which is students learning.

Sarika: And Matteo, I have had the pleasure of interacting with some of your students, and I must tell you that we can clearly see the combination of theory and practice, you know, when they present to us their thoughts and their new ideas during our discussions with them. So, you know, we see it in practice as well.

Let's explore from another angle. So Virginia, when we speak of allyship, what would you say to inspire leaders to shape a more inclusive work culture, especially when we talk about women with disabilities in the workforce?

Virginia: So an ally is someone who uses their position to remove barriers and open doors without taking ownership of another person's voice. Senior leaders do not need to become disability expert overnight.

They don't need to be expert. But they do need to ask, listen, and act. I think the verbs are important. To ask other people, to listen, and after, to take action. They must provide the resources required for accessibility and reasonable adjustments.

Hold managers accountable and make sure that disability is included in the organization's talent strategy. For me, leadership should also go beyond mentoring employees with a disability and actively sponsor their careers, no?

That means, recommending them for, for complex project, having them visibility, including them in succession plan, and ensuring that highly qualified and managerial position are also defined inclusively because if not, they don't change nothing.

Sarika: Well said, Virginia, and thank you so much. But I'd also like to add that I'm really proud of what we've achieved together on a wide range of initiatives and programs, and really look forward to our continued collaboration in the future.

So Matteo, perhaps you've heard of this. A report from our Capgemini Research Institute, which we did last year, found that while 77% of leaders view women and men as equally effective, we still see gender biases that consider future technical skills like, AI, data analysis, and innovation being inherently masculine.

Today, everyone needs to master the skills to use AI efficiently, and that includes students as well. So what should institutions and organizations do to encourage everyone to grow their technical skills, especially in AI, regardless of who they are or where they are from?

Matteo: Tech became coded as a men's world for structural reasons. Decades of pipeline gaps in computer science degrees. Funding that flows disproportionately to male-founded AI startups, and boardrooms that promote an already male technical bench. And you can see from the, the so-called tech bro that dominate today the world of AI, but not just that, in the tech in general, they are mostly male.

So the result of this world is that fewer women in the rooms, where AI strategy gets set means fewer women shaping what gets built and how it's governed. So that's a big cost for innovation. AI systems trained and directed by a narrow set of perspectives, inherit the narrowness in the data, in the cases that are used, and in the blind spots.

I come always in class with an example. When the manufacturers project their cars, they have for many years, for decades indeed, they had the male body as a reference. As a result, women, suffered more damages when they had accidents because the safety belts, the objects and the technology of the cars were not measured upon their bodies.

It's super important that companies take this as one of their main values, not just as an option. So, in this respect, every function students are heading into, from finance, to HR, to consulting, is being reshaped by AI tools faster than most of our curriculum.

So part of my job as a teacher, as an educator, as an academic director, in making sure that, students leave with the instinct to keep watching that shift, not a fixed idea what their role will look like in five years, but rather as, they can navigate these shifts.

So, if AI fluency becomes a prerequisite to stay relevant, then unequal access to that fluency becomes an axis of inequality, which adds on top of the old ones.

Sarika: Absolutely.

Matteo: So concretely, what can we do? Companies use targeted upskilling programs and mentoring for people who had, let's say, a diminished access to this kind of technology. So reintegration, AI training tracks for women returning from career breaks, reskilling pathways for older employees whose roles are shifting, and mentorship programs, pairing junior staff from underrepresented groups with technical leaders.

Sarika: Interesting, interesting set of suggestions. And, Matteo, at Capgemini, we also strongly believe in bridging these gaps to offer equal opportunities to the best talent, no matter where they are from.

And of course, we can all see AI rapidly becoming a foundational skill in the job market now. Future leaders will need to understand not only how AI works, but also its opportunities, its limitations, its risks, and of course, the ethics involved.

So Aimee, you've led cross-sector and multi-agency data-driven initiatives for more than two decades. What would you say to inspire the women out there who are considering pursuing similar careers?

Aimee: It's absolutely the right time to pursue a career in STEM and in data and really thinking about how that enables AI in a safe and proportionate way. Whether you're in private or public sector. There's never been a better time to work in this field. It's exciting and it's ever-changing like literally on a monthly basis, as I'm sure you can all see.

Sarika: Daily.

Aimee: Yeah,

Sarika: It's daily.

Aimee: Daily everything's changing

If you're curious, if you're inquisitive, this is the career for you. Women are so well-suited to roles in data, and particularly data analysis and data science because they rely on collaboration, cooperation, really thinking through the impact of design and actually what you're gonna do with the tools that you're creating. And these are inherently feminine traits, whether that's because that is what it's like to be a woman or whether actually they're the roles that we've been in all our lives through history.

But being caring and really thinking about impact of that and the effect on others is something that just I think comes naturally to women, and therefore data's roles really fit that well.

Sarika: Aimee, thank you so much. I know you pointed out that women are better suited to roles in data analysis. I couldn't agree more. It's curious because that's one of the skills where more men rated it as their strength than women, but it's these perceptions that we need to keep challenging and encourage more and more women to build careers and become leaders in data.

Building inclusive future ready leadership also requires more than just good intentions. I think to challenge perceptions, we also need to encourage women with learning opportunities. This has been very important to us at Capgemini. You'd be happy to know, Aimee, that we have digital academies actually globally and many other learning programs where we help young girls to learn digital skills.

And not just girls, even our Code Your Future program, which is, you know, running very successfully in UK, we work with refugees and people from underserved communities to help them become software engineers

Aimee: Brilliant.

Sarika: As we conclude this conversation, we've seen that many of the barriers we are dealing with are embedded in perception and long-standing stereotypes. Inclusive leadership doesn't happen by accident. It takes intention and action to ensure leadership roles are accessible to everyone with talent, passion, and potential.

The world we live in is becoming more complex every day, and no single person has all the answers. Leaders today and in the future need to be able to create environments where different perspectives are welcomed and true collaboration can flourish.

And with that, we are at the end of this episode.

Thank you, Aimee, Virginia, Matteo, for sharing some of your incredible experiences with us here. I'm sure this has given our listeners a lot to think about.

This is Beyond the Barriers. Stay tuned and don't miss the next episode