



#inclusiveHR is a social movement for change to improve the experience of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic HR & OD professionals within the NHS. We want to close the compassion gap and advance equality, diversity and inclusion and lead with credibility as a HR & OD profession.

This month Cheryl Samuels, Deputy Director of Workforce Transformation, NHS England & NHS Improvement, shares Paul Taylor Pitt's powerful story of his personal leadership journey.



To be an ally
Paul Taylor Pitt

Growing up gay (and white) in Scotland in the 1970s was an interesting experience. And of course by interesting I mean hard. I felt like I was the only queer boy in the world. This feeling of difference, of other-ness was my crucible of compassion. I couldn't understand why anyone would treat me badly just because of who I loved. In secondary school, the headteacher said that there were two new pupils joining, and that they were black. This was a first for us. He asked if anyone in the class would have a problem with that. Nobody said anything, but I felt a fire light inside me. I felt so angry that our permission was being sought. After he left, the kids – mostly boys – in the class started to laugh and joke about having a black kid in the school. I sat with my face burning, desperate to say something but fearful that I would put myself up for ridicule when I was already skating on thinly veiled homophobic ice. I stayed quiet, which I regret to this day.

For a while I believed that the empathy for others that developed from my queerness was enough. I called myself a feminist. A trans advocate. An anti-racist. After the murder of George Floyd in 2020, I felt enraged, but once again trapped – this time by a pandemic. I am fortunate to be part of an amazing team of colleagues, and we made space in our work days for us to talk about the Black Lives Matter movement and our own experiences of when we stood up against racism, and also when we turned away. The conversations were difficult and brilliant. It started as a group of three, and built, and grew, until we had a mass of people talking about this. We were stuck in conversation, feeling frustrated about doing nothing. I suggested that we start

a BLM Book Club, beginning with Layla Saad's "Me and White Privilege". We all started the book on the same day, working through each of the daily exercises on our own and came together at the end to compare notes.

For me, I recognised for the first time that being gay does not cancel out my white privilege. The moment of illumination came when reading the chapter on allies, where Saad says allyship is not an identity but a practice. I can't self-identify as an ally – it's up to others to determine that based on my behaviour. Of course, the behaviour and action has to be rooted in clear values, so there was a glimmer of hope, but it was still a call to action that I couldn't ignore. From the book club, we began to look more deeply into how we could be a more inclusive organization that truly demonstrates anti-racist practice. We worked with our internal BAME network and agreed to look initially at our recruitment practices. Two tangible changes that we made were to include a clear and unambiguous question about inclusion in every single interview, and that it would be a deal-breaker. We also took the decision to deliberately create the best conditions for our interviews, where people could feel most relaxed and at their best. This includes sending a copy of the interview questions in advance so that we are truly meeting the person, not their rehearsed answers.

Those are two small steps that I hope will help us to walk faster and in time take a great leap. Personally I have included an anti-racist objective in my annual appraisal and encouraged members of my team to do the same so that we can hold each other to account. There is so much more to do and I encourage my white peers to examine their privilege, not in a judgmental way but with curiosity and kindness. Treating ourselves compassionately gives us permission to treat others that way too. We need to make peace with and have ongoing awareness of our own experiences so that we can outgrow them and be a truly useful force for good in the world.