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Re: Discrimination legislation proposals

For me, if you have ever been singled out, denied a service, not felt valued or respected, or even felt harassed, and where assumptions have been made about your capacity and abilities, you may have been discriminated against. It might be something small, but a thousand small cuts can lead to a gaping big wound.

If you are employed in a workplace, attend a school or access services in a society that allows this to happen without questioning it, then we have a community that enables judgement, creates defensiveness and leads to blame and discrimination. Productivity is a result of acceptance, the ability to be creative and being allowed to fail or have bad times. If you are a supportive employer you have a workforce that will commit to the organisation and aim to always perform at their best. If you are an employer who often uses performance management and disciplinary policies to manage employees out, that is a clear signal to all staff that anything less than perfection will not be tolerated. Guess what happens when you create an environment like that?

One of the biggest arguments against a discrimination law is that people who have poor mental health will take time off work and cost the business money. Let’s face it we all have difficult times, divorce, death and grief, illness, buying a house, a teenager with erratic behaviour, new parenthood or a heavy workload. There are going to be times when we can’t perform to our full capacity. So how about we focus on helping all employees to perform, and access the support they need, instead of prematurely judging a change in their behaviour? Flexi working, enabling staff to take time off for appointments, job sharing, working from home or reduced hours for a short period of time. All of these things, and qualified Mental Health First Aiders to reduce pressure on management, will make a difference.

Boley Smillie, CEO of Guernsey Post changed his attitude towards staff members experiencing poor mental health and within a year he had returned 65% of absence costs to the business, the next year he saved another 19%. In total a return of £100,000 to the business. How? By enabling staff members to take time off for poor mental health and not demanding they come back. Staff who might previously have taken 3 to 6 months off started taking 1 or 2 days off and then coming back to what they perceived as a welcoming and non-judgemental environment.

Discrimination is about attitude and judgement, and that is what costs our society money. It’s time to turn ourselves inwards and really assess whether full employment is just the excuse that leads us to manage out employees who we perceive to be ‘difficult’. Increased productivity is always related to more compassionate, understanding and skilful management techniques.

The CIPD Survey ‘Guernsey Mental Health in the Workplace Survey, 2017’ found that 71% of people in Guernsey felt that they couldn’t talk to their employer about their mental health compared to 49% in the UK. Discrimination does exist on this Island and employees are clearly demonstrating this. A problem can never be solved by hiding it and pretending we are already perfect. Let’s face it head on and tackle the issue. Let’s make our Island a place our children can be proud of.

If you have ever felt discriminated against, ever felt you couldn’t talk to your employer, the States, shop owners, restaurants or even your family, then stand up and make your voice heard. If you’ve ever been made to feel ashamed of who you are or made to feel different then be clear that you want it to change. It’s time to look to the future and enable every member of our community to be valued and respected and not just those who fit into an ever-decreasing circle of what is ‘right’ and ‘normal’.