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CEO Dialogues – Activating Bold and Transformational Leadership that Recognises Diversity and Inclusion as its Strength

What are the CEO Dialogues?

It is now widely acknowledged in transformational leadership literature that strong organisations embrace diversity, but only unified organisations are able to translate that strength into success. A transformational leader is able to achieve both. The definition of a successful leader has therefore changed. Previously, a good leader would use past experiences to accurately extrapolate future scenarios. If the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 operating context has taught us anything, it is that those goal posts have now shifted.

In order to frame the conversation around bold, representative and transformational leadership and specifically, how this can be leveraged to address some of our most pressing social and economic challenges, the **National Business Initiative (NBI)** has launched a series of **CEO Thought Leadership Dialogues**. The CEO Dialogues serve as a key lever to drive transformation and social change, while helping to shape the narrative around the imperative of a cohesive, just and transformed society.

Central to the vision of the CEO Dialogues is a recommitment from the private sector to actively and meaningfully contribute to changing our society. This is done by fundamentally addressing inequality, inequity, exclusion, diversity, representation, ethics, governance as well as economic recovery if we are to achieve long-term social cohesion and stability. Our ability to not only build, but as importantly to enhance representation and diversity in the workforce, must be supported by transformed and inclusive organisational cultures. Inclusive cultures unlock innovations and efficiencies that improve business performance, thereby expanding the contributions made by business to growing and sustaining our economy.

The CEO Thought Leaders are bold and courageous transformative C-Suite executives who commit to personally engage with their peers on transformation issues, through continuous dialogues and supporting the implementation of transformation approaches within their organisations. To date, the NBI has hosted two CEO Dialogues, one on “Gender-Based Violence – How Leadership Can Make a Difference and Explore Practical Responses?” with **Graham O’Connor (SPAR: CEO)** and the second on “How Inclusive Organisational Cultures Drive a High-Performance Culture” with **Basani Maluleke (African Bank: CEO)** and **Nene Molefe, Change and Transformational Professional (Mandate Molefi: Owner and Managing Director)**.

What defines a transformational and representative leader?

Considering the rate at which the requirements and priorities of leadership are transitioning, how do leaders craft business strategies that will address diversity and inclusion simultaneously? A theme emerging from both CEO Dialogues is that leaders have to play a bridging role to create trust. *“Building trust in organisations requires leaders to not only show up as their authentic selves but also enable others to show up as themselves. This means creating safe psychological spaces where employees are empowered to speak out”*, says Basani Maluleke.

The second theme emerging from the dialogues is that transformational leaders use their voice to positively impact society at large. Graham O’Connor summed this up succinctly in relation to tackling Gender-Based Violence (GBV), saying: *“I am a big believer in one’s circle of influence. As leaders we have to use the platforms we have because we have a direct influence on a large number of people. I implore leaders to use their influence in the fight against GBV/F.”*

A third recurring theme is that transformational leaders commit to the long-term work of driving change and understand that: *“In order to create diverse, equitable & socially transformed organisations, leaders need to be committed to the complete journey. This means doing the work, walking the path and sticking to the overall vision as a company”*, says Nene Molefe.

Successful leaders are agile, able to embrace change while inspiring others to believe in their vision of something that is yet to exist. In order to do this, a bold leader is not afraid to empower those around them. *“A key part of my role has been convening breakfast meetings with people throughout the organisation, so that employees at all levels are part of the important conversations, and to send the message that everyone has a voice”*, explains Basani Maluleke.

The transformational leadership required to tackle systemic issues like inequality and discrimination of all kinds in the workplace needs leaders to be self-aware, especially of their own power and positionality that influence their unconscious biases. Nene Molefi asserts: *“Transforming organisations requires leaders to show up and lead beyond their personal identity, extending themselves to understand discrimination they may not have experienced. This type of authentic leadership will never fail.”*

Finally, transformational leaders leave no one behind, prioritising a culture of inclusivity as the ingredient to success, building unified organisations that translate that integration into wider society. Graham O’Connor acknowledges this as: *“Culture is more important to us than our strategy. A great strategy with a poor culture you will get you nowhere. A great culture and a mediocre strategy will start to get you somewhere, but ideally you want both.”*

What is the CEO Dialogue call to action?

The insights and lessons learnt through these dialogues hope to achieve two overarching mandates:

1. Galvanising the support of CEO Champions to achieve ambitious transformation goals and targets that enhance workplaces and business performances while driving collective action for societal change.
2. Encouraging CEOs to take action by prioritising the transformation of organisational cultures. This commitment will be driven by a realisation that addressing inequity and exclusion is not only a societal issue but provides a competitive advantage.

These dialogues are important because leadership is an enabler and catalyst for organisations to drive change. The NBI’s Social Transformation agenda is focussed on providing the necessary support and platforms for this form of systemic change.

For more information on the Bold and Transformative Leadership Pathway | CEO Dialogues or to become a CEO Champion/Thought Leader, please contact Bridgette Mdangayi (Programme Manager: Social Transformation): BridgetteM@nbi.org.za

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