


Courageous conversations: turning words into action

28 September 2022  Grace Woolford

We began our Courageous Conversations initiative to enable people from all parts of the firm to share personal stories and learn from each other. Each conversation is on a different theme, often topics that people might find difficult to talk about, such as gender bias, menopause or disability. Team members who are affected by these issues come together to share their personal experiences, to help raise awareness and increase understanding in the audience of how others might be affected or how they can help.

Grace Woolford

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Grace Woolford, a Practice Assistant in our Nottingham office, was motivated to take part in a Courageous Conversation after experiencing a hate crime. Her experience led her to join in a conversation about LGBTQ+ communities, run to coincide with National Inclusion Week. "They've been unable to keep me out of it since!" Grace laughs. The experience allowed her to channel her anger into something bigger and positive – helping others have difficult conversations about challenges in their lives, that have led to real changes within our business.

Taking part in her first Courageous Conversation session was personally important for Grace after her experience. But she is driven to continue taking part after witnessing the real impact sessions have had on the lives of her colleagues. "The Courageous Conversations start a domino effect", Grace explains. "What people hear in an hour or so can have a lightbulb effect and plant a seed in their brains. It takes them on a learning arc towards becoming a more inclusive person, but it can also help them to come to realisations about themselves". After each Conversation she's been part of, listeners have told Grace how what they heard challenged and inspired them.

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"But, it's not just that," she tells us. "These conversations are effecting real changes in our workplace and it's great to see how all our voices matter at Browne Jacobson". The conversation during Disability History Month, for example, resulted in further discussion around accessibility in our office spaces. This prompted the office team to review our office spaces, and change features that they had not realised were not fully accessible before – for example, the team took the opportunity to install a sink in the kitchen space in the new Birmingham office that is height adjustable, removed heavy glass doors that can be difficult to open and changed the flush mechanism on the toilets to ensure they are easy to use by all, including those with disabilities.

“Knowing that a conversation you have had has resulted in meaningful, quantifiable change has been the most rewarding thing, and the thing that motivates me to continue to participate and help guide and mentor others taking part,” says Grace. The conversations have opened up our eyes to the challenges that exist not just in our working lives but across society as a whole. “You may never know who is being excluded until you hear about it from their perspective. It’s amazing how hearing one other person’s perspective can alter our own”, explains Grace. Through connecting our people and hearing them speak about their experiences, we can learn from each other and work towards real changes.

This isn’t always easy. “They’re called ‘Courageous Conversations for a reason,” says Grace. “Opening up and sharing personal stories about difficult issues with colleagues is hard! But, when you feel able to bring your whole self to work, you can grow and change for the better.” The sessions are carefully structured in advance to make sure everyone taking part feels safe. Equally for the audience, listening to real stories can be a potentially uncomfortable experience, but one which can help everyone build more understanding and become better allies for those who face challenges.

For Grace, the conversations have not only helped her learn about herself but also professionally – she is confident that continuing to work in Diversity and Inclusion will continue to be part of her future career, having seen how one small idea or discussion can make a real impact on the people around her. “I wish more organisations did stuff like this,” she tells us, “because it’s been massively impactful in my life”.

Fact box: Courageous Conversations

- **What is the initiative?** A programme of talks exploring the lived experiences of different subjects and issues that affect people across the firm. The hour-long talks are given by team members with personal experience of the subject matter.
- **When does it happen?** The Conversations take place at lunchtimes at regular intervals throughout the year.
- **Where is it taking place?** The Conversations take place live on Teams so you can join wherever you are.
- **Who can join in?** Everyone’s welcome – whether that’s to share an experience, join the audience or simply listen.

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