

Those who stand for nothing fall for everything

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Integrity and fairness have always been a key part of who I am for as long as I can remember. At school I remember getting into trouble for standing up for others who had been wrongly punished. Today, my integrity continues to be my non-negotiable. I guess I'm lucky that it also happens to be a key requirement for my 'day job' as an audit partner! These core values of integrity and fairness have been the main drivers for my purpose, helping to ensure that the hard-earned savings and pensions of people are appropriately managed and protected. Through the years of my professional career this ideal of integrity and fairness has been tested many times. And the rock I then keep going back to as these core values are challenged is my faith.

As a practising Sikh, it is pretty difficult to hide my faith. My outward appearance of a turban and beard immediately marks me in many people's eyes as a person of religion (though many confuse Sikhism and Islam). Intentionally or not, I therefore represent all Sikhs in their eyes, be it on public transport, in the office or at the coffee shop. A responsibility I do not take lightly.

However, the visible nature of my faith can be both a blessing and a source of challenges at the same time. Being the first turbaned Sikh partner in the 'big 4' accountancy firms in the UK was something I hope helps prove to Sikh youth that they can do it too – yes, there are people like us in firms like this. Working in the City of London, the numbers are growing but there are still only a few of us who wear our turbans, making it easy to be remembered by clients and colleagues.

We have come a long way since the 1950s. My grandfather, who was in the UK for a year in the late 50s training with British Rail as part of a commonwealth exchange programme, told me stories of his fellow Sikh friends having to cut their hair and shave their beards in order to get jobs. Thankfully my grandfather did not have to. A decade later, my father was in the UK to complete his barrister training and be called to the bar. He proudly wore his turban even when faced with discrimination during his time here. Today, there are still challenges I face from the more subtle to the direct name calling. Where humility is taken as a sign of weakness and sadly the partisan nature of the world at the moment only makes this worse.

Why it is important that I am a Sikh – what does this mean for my colleagues or the organisation I work for? To me, it means that I live by the 3 key tenets of Sikhism which are earning an honest living, remembering God in what I do and sharing what I have (caring for others). It means that I treat all of humanity equally and fairly. I try not to judge but to welcome; to stand up and help all who need it.

What that has meant for the firms I have worked with is a strong work ethic coupled with fairness and integrity. I hope this is what led my fellow partners to ask me to represent them as Chair of the Europe, the Middle East, and Africa (EMEA) Partner Forum, representing rank and file partners in the EMEA region and to also sit on EY's Global Governance Council with our external independent non-executive directors.

I do not mean to imply or to assume that only people of religion bring these values as I have worked with some absolutely brilliant people over the years. So why is it then important for people to be able to be open about their faith at work?

If your faith is important to you then you cannot ignore the fact that it will impact your values, your goals and your view of the world, just like I cannot ignore the fact that, as a Sikh, I live by the 3 key tenets above. People of other faiths will bring their own values and world views to the workplace.

Looking solely at this from a factual perspective, getting to know and understanding your teams, be it their goals or their purpose from a day to day perspective, is only going to help you get better outcomes and productivity from them. If you are judging this purely from a profitability perspective, it therefore makes sense to support your teams and employees to acknowledge their faith at work.

But this all comes with a caveat where research conducted by the Boston Consulting Group has shown that diverse teams (and remember, diversity comes in many guises including different faiths) will materially out-perform non-diverse teams only when all the members of the team feel included. I for one would struggle to understand how someone whose faith is important to them can bring their whole selves to work if they then have to hide their faith at work. A key part of inclusion for someone whose faith is important to them is the acceptance of them as a whole, including their faith.

I do wonder if we sometimes also under value the impact firms can have in changing their employee behaviour and, consequently, nudge society's views. Many firms currently tout their D&I credentials. This is as a result of the rise in disclosure requirements especially for firms in Europe in Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) – three key factors currently being used when measuring the sustainability and ethical impact of a business. However, I see very little said about faith in those disclosures.

Lastly, I cannot ignore the fact that I write this article as the world starts to emerge from 'Covid 19 lockdown'. I hope and pray that this virus does not return with a similar vengeance again soon, but I am also sure that other viruses will. Over the last few weeks, many have commented that this situation is a key tipping point for society; a wake up call that will drive humanity to change. I am sure I am not the only person who hopes this is true but is also sceptical given humanity's inertia. I have yet to see real ideas of lasting change that this new big turning point will bring.

I remain sceptical because it is at times such as these that bring out the true nature of people, of leaders. But how many of us actually know what we stand for, or what the leaders that we admire or follow stand for? Everyone claims to have values but do they really drive our decisions or do we continuously compromise on them, watering them down until they are just empty words we say?

To borrow a quote from my favourite musical, Hamilton – "If you stand for nothing, what'll you fall for?" though I think the original quote from Alexander Hamilton was "Those who stand for nothing fall for everything".

In the age of fake news, social media sensations, political vacuums, polarisation, we do yearn for clarity on the values of our political and social as well as commercial organisations. Businesses will have to re-earn the trust of their customers post Covid-19. Many of these institutions claim to be driven by values but how many can actually demonstrate publicly the concrete and sometimes profit reducing decisions that they have made in defending those values. How many of these leaders from all spheres that impact us have the courage and humility to admit to mistakes of judgement?

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For me, it is the 'rock' of my faith that I keep returning to, to remind me of what values are important to me; what guides me in my decision making; what I stand for; *and what I will fall for*. I hope my children will be free to bring their whole selves including their faith, to work.