Through its BAME mentoring scheme, Action for Children is leading the way when it comes to inclusivity and employee development. **STEPHEN COTTERILL** talks to two of the participants.

Following a consultation with staff late last year, national children’s charity Action for Children recently launched a mentoring scheme for black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) employees that will match them with BAME leaders from the corporate world. The scheme is being delivered in partnership with the Apollo Project, an initiative of the Interlaw Diversity Forum that aims to provide organisations with the tools to create more inclusive workplaces.

Currently, 12 Action for Children staff have each been matched with mentors from the business world who will meet them once a month for the next year. The mentees will also take part in a peer-to-peer support group, attend networking events and be given the opportunity to shadow an Action for Children director.

The mentor: Justina Omotayo, business development manager at law firm Slaughter and May

**How did you get involved in the BAME mentoring programme?**

I have been involved in several mentoring programmes as a mentee for many years and have benefitted enormously from them. I had been feeling like I wanted to give something back for a while so when Interlaw approached me with the opportunity to become a BAME mentor with Action for Children, I knew straight away this was something for me. The opportunity to be part of a mentoring programme with a charity that does such fantastic work in support of children and families across the UK was an instant draw for me.

**What attributes does a good mentor need to have?**

You need to be open-minded, a good listener and a strong, all-round communicator. It’s important to take a personal interest and be invested in the mentee, but most importantly it’s about having a positive attitude and outlook – no one wants a pessimistic mentor. As a mentor, I am responsible for the guidance and support I offer. It is critical to ensure it is of value and benefits my mentee.

**What does this mentoring role involve?**

It’s a two-way relationship built on honesty and transparency, whilst also getting to know one another. Fundamentally, it is about investing yourself to support your mentee in achieving their desired objective or goal. More frequently than not, my role is to listen and be the sounding board to the mentee on issues or challenges they face and support them to identify an approach or decision to achieve their intended outcome. My mentee Jaipreet, for example, is in touch with me weekly to update me on some of the wins she has achieved on the action points we agreed at our last meeting. It’s great to receive these sorts of updates.

**What differences in relation to diversity have you seen between the corporate and charity world?**

My general impression is that the charity world is quite a diverse place to work and perhaps a few steps ahead of that of the corporates – though I should caveat this that my knowledge and exposure to the charity world has been quite limited. However, I know the corporate world has introduced a lot of initiatives to tackle diversity in recent years, especially with regards to LGBT, women’s and BAME perspectives. It’s certainly high on the agenda for many corporates and they are actively addressing some of the imbalance. But there is a lot of work still to be done for there to be a diverse representation on boards in both the charity and corporate worlds. This change won’t happen overnight, but we are moving in the right direction. Progress is being made and it is being well received.

**What are you hoping your mentee gets from this?**

I feel privileged to be Jaipreet’s mentor. By the end of the programme I hope she feels equipped to achieve her full potential, be able to tick off a few things from her goals and has the necessary steps in place to achieve those goals that are a stretch for her. I also hope that she is an advocate for future mentoring programmes and feels that it was valuable.
How did you become involved in the mentoring scheme?
I am part of a group called Breakthrough which was set up by Action for Children to discuss issues around diversity, with a particular focus on BAME issues. We meet once a month and through that I was encouraged to apply for the programme.

What is involved in the programme?
We have each been matched with a mentor from the corporate sector. A face-to-face introductory meeting was set up and we exchanged details, and decided on where and when to have meetings. I meet Justina every two weeks for around two hours. On weeks when we don't meet, we usually speak on the phone. She is incredibly committed to the process, very inspirational and encouraging.

Each week she sets me both short-term and long-term objectives – goals that I want to achieve on a weekly basis in my job, as well as future career progression and development aims – and she helps me devise a strategy on how to achieve them. When we next meet we discuss what I have and what I haven't managed to do. Justina is very good at holding me accountable, which makes me want to achieve more.

What do you hope to get from the programme?
I want to be more confident in my role and believe that I could be a manager in a year’s time if I set my mind to it. I think that with her help I can become a leader. Although we work in different industries, there are qualities in leadership that are the same regardless of the sector and can be applied to fundraising. To be a good leader I need to face difficult situations, to be more confident and speak up when I need to.

What have you learnt about working in the corporate sector?
I am glad that I work in the fundraising sector, as it is a bit more relaxed and flexible. It seems quite hardcore in the corporate sector in terms of workload and working hours. But there are some similar struggles.

How do you feel the sector is doing in terms of diversity?
To be honest with you, I don't think it is as diverse as it should be. I have worked and interned at many charities and I have usually been the only person of colour in the room. That has been the same way for quite a few years now. I don't feel things have moved on much. I don't know if that is because people from BAME communities aren't applying for jobs in fundraising because they are not interested in it, or whether there are family pressures to do something else. I think the sector has a really long way to go, but groups such as Breakthrough and this mentoring scheme are the right way to go and hopefully more organisations will take up this type of opportunity. There should be more investment in how we can help BAME staff, how we can help them become the next head of philanthropy or director of fundraising. We need to focus on giving people those opportunities and skills. I think sometimes that diversity is not on the fundraising sector’s agenda, but this is a good step forward.

What do you think the sector can do to remove the barriers to entry for people from more diverse backgrounds?
I feel like universities and schools have a big part to play. When I was at school, I had no idea about what fundraising was or that you could have a career in it. There was more focus on the core professions such as accountancy or being a lawyer or doctor. I feel that charities should go into schools and talk about fundraising and how fundraisers help people.

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