EQUALITY DIVERSITY INCLUSION



My journey in place leadership

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I'm Zeynep Esen, a Senior Principal at Penna Recruitment Company, where I lead on place-based recruitment across the country. I have worked in this sector for ten years, including almost eight years at Penna.

My route into the place sector wasn't meticulously planned, which has made the journey even more interesting. After university, I fell into recruitment, moving through the early stages of my career then to the executive level and into local government.

With each step, I found myself becoming increasingly drawn to place and the real difference it can make to people and communities. Over time, I realised this was the area I was most passionate about and where I could add the most value.

For me, there is a strong personal connection to the idea of place. I am a second-generation immigrant from an ethnic minority background and a proud member of the LGBTQ+ community. From an early age, I was aware of the importance of belonging and connection, whether that was through culture, family, friendships or simply feeling part of a place.

My experiences of my own identity and relationship to my local area developed a natural curiosity in me to how other people experience place and community and this has shaped the way I approach leadership.

If we want to create places that work for everyone, we need people in leadership roles who understand that there isn't one universal experience of a place.

People bring their different backgrounds, cultures, experiences and perspectives with them. Those differences can influence what they see and experience, what they value and what they think needs to change. When they are given space, these insights enrich conversations and decision-making in the place sector.

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As I have grown and progressed through my career, I've become more comfortable bringing my whole self to work and sharing my own perspective. This has helped me to contribute to conversations on place based on my own experiences.

Being authentic and open in this way has helped me build stronger relationships and have more meaningful conversations.

Sometimes it can feel as though creating an inclusive workforce requires major programmes or massive organisational overhaul.

Of course, these things are important and sometimes necessary but inclusion can also be embedded through smaller actions too, which can sometimes make the most meaningful changes.

Having a team of people around you who are willing to listen and make space for your unique perspectives makes all the difference.

We need leaders who don't immediately assume that their experience is everybody else's experience too.

Successful leaders are the ones who ask questions, listen and are prepared to see a place from somebody else's perspective.

Ultimately, creating better places starts with understanding the people who live and work in them. Creating more inclusive organisations starts in much the same way, by recognising the value of each individual experience and making sure there is space for these experiences to be heard.

My background has made me curious about communities and how people experience place. The more curious we are about different experiences, perspectives and communities, the better equipped we'll be to create places that feel better for everyone.