

## Recruitment & Management

# Learning to look outside the box

'Dialogue in the Dark' seminars designed to help businesses deal with people with disabilities, writes **Amanda Phelan**

**A** SMALL group of people sit hunched in concentration at a skills seminar in a Ballsbridge hotel. The woman on the right with a throaty voice grabs my knee. Her touch is welcome.

She's not alone in seeking human comfort - most of the people attending this conference are gripping each other for reassurance just moments after being introduced.

Seminars on leadership skills, group dynamics and how to act in crisis are standard events for business people. But there's a key difference with this one... it's being held in total darkness. Called "Dialogue in the Dark", the programme aims to teach people what it's like to live with a disability. The participants are issued with white canes, and helped to move around by blind guides.

The experience of performing simple group tasks, such as assembling a rainbow using jigsaw-style pieces, is a confronting and humbling role reversal that some find overwhelming. The organisers say one senior Chinese banking executive fled a seminar screaming.

"I asked her what could be tougher than trading in millions of

dollars in commodities a day? Surely staying in a darkened room couldn't be so unbearable," says the man who came up with the idea for the "Dialogue in the Dark" seminars, Andreas Heinecke.

The workshops are run in 22 countries worldwide, including at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland last year, and aim to break the stereotypes about disability.

Organisers say the workshops' dynamics help breach cultural boundaries, such as in Japan, where close personal contact is a social taboo.

They also provide practical business training on topics such as how to work together in a crisis, says Mr Heinecke.

The exercise in the dark is supposed to reveal things about our individual styles. After I crack jokes and fail to complete my rainbow, the organisers conclude I needed to work on my leadership skills and that I don't function like a senior business type like, for example, a recent merchant banking group (I secretly take this as a compliment).

First established 20 years ago, the sensory deprivation exercise is now a global franchise, and Mr Heinecke from Germany is paid



The "Dialogue in the Dark" seminar aims to teach people what it's like to live with a disability. Photograph: Chris Bellew/Fennell Photography

to run the seminars. This week the team was in Ireland for the first time at the invitation of Kanchi, an Irish organisation set up to foster a better relationship between people with disabilities and the general public.

Kanchi was founded by Dubliner Caroline Casey, a visually-impaired woman who named the

organisation in honour of the elephant on which she undertook a 1,000 kilometre trek across southern India to shake up the stereotypes of what a disabled person could achieve.

Kanchi hopes the "Dialogue in the Dark" workshops will give business people a better insight into the daily experiences of those

without the use of faculties the rest of us take for granted.

"It's a chance to get a rare insight into the challenges faced by people who have a disability," says Kanchi managing director Gabrielle Murphy.

To get an idea of what the seminar is like, just shut your eyes. Now stand up and try to move around or pick up something. It's almost impossible to go more than a minute or two without opening your eyes again.

"It's pretty intense, but it's an exceptional experience and it makes you think outside the box," says Kieran McDermott, who runs the McDonalds franchise in Shannon and Ennis. "It gives you an amazing snapshot into the life of someone with a disability, and you feel quite vulnerable."

Mr McDermott was invited to take part in the seminar after he

won an award for his role in employing people with disabilities in a small company.

"We have a drive-in, and I couldn't see why we shouldn't employ somebody in a wheelchair to take orders," he says.

Although he had to buy a €6,000 wheelchair to fulfil his mission, Mr McDermott (44) says it's been well worth it. "The chair is used through different shifts," he says. "About 10 per cent of our staff have a disability, and there's no turnover; they don't leave because they really want the job."

"It's important for employers to look beyond the disability, to look at what people can do, rather than what they can't."

Mr McDermott expanded on his idea by making his McDonalds branches accessible to people with a range of disabilities - for example, there are specially-

## English boss's secret survey

Manager hears for himself what his workers really think by going undercover, writes **Stefan Stern**

EMPLOYEE ATTITUDE surveys, brown bag lunches, focus groups, informal chats: managers try quite hard to find out what their staff are thinking. But the results are mixed at best. What are your staff thinking? Admit it - you don't really know.

Is there any way of finding out? Electronic surveillance would be a bad idea. Cloaks of invisibility work for Harry Potter, but are not available to the rest of us. One chief executive has done the next best thing. He went undercover in his own business for two weeks, disguised as an office worker, completing shifts on 10 different sites.

He has heard for himself what his people really think. It has been a revelatory experience.

Stephen Martin is the 43-year-old chief executive of the Clugston Group, a medium-sized civil engineering and logistics company based in the north of England. But for two weeks earlier this year, as far as his colleagues were concerned he was "Martin Walker", an ordinary co-worker trying to earn a living like everybody else.

Ordinary, that is, except for the film crew that was following him around. The cover story was that this documentary team wanted to record how a clerical worker would cope with the demands of a physical labouring job.

In truth they were making a programme, called *Undercover Boss*, which will air on Channel 4 in two weeks' time and then in a US version later this year.

How did Mr Martin avoid being found out? He is still a relatively new chief executive, having started in December 2006. He