pollara
strategic insights

TO: ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

FROM: ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

DATE: March 31, 2021

RE: **IRCC's Anti-Racism Focus Groups Topline Summary**

Methodology Overview

Pollara Strategic Insights conducted a total of ten (10) Anti-Racism focus groups with 55 IRCC employees between March 18 and March 26 of 2021.

Summary of Findings

Positive Views of IRCC

We started most groups asking what participants liked about working at IRCC and why they thought people stay. The following themes arose often:

- **The department's mission.** As the result of immigration, many participants felt strongly about being able to work in an environment where they can contribute and give back to the process that got them or their families to Canada. For many, this was coming from a place of gratitude for the system that allowed them to settle here and empathy for those who have to go through that process.

  - For many, this belief in the importance of the IRCCs mission makes the disappointment and concern about racism witnessed from within more emotionally acute because it is associated with concern about the beliefs and values of decision-makers in the system that affect the lives of people like them.

- **The racial and ethnic diversity within**, at least as seen at the lower levels of the organization in the National Capital Region (NCR). Those who work in these environments feel at home and encouraged by this (while raising significant concerns about the lack of upward mobility which will be addressed later).

  - Those who have worked in other Federal departments recognize this as distinctive to IRCC where racial diversity is less widespread (or at least less visible).

- **A perception that the organization is relatively "open-minded"**, exhibited in diversity in the entry level workforce and by what is seen as a relatively greater focus on human wellbeing than in some other federal departments.

- **The variety of work experience and more potential for both vertical and lateral moves** compared to other departments that some have worked in (e.g., border services and corrections, to name a few). Although, there are serious concerns about racial equity in access to vertical mobility at IRCC.

Is there racism at IRCC?

Throughout all groups the answer was a firm and clear "yes". Only a handful of participants initially hesitated to label what they have seen and experienced as racism, although most soon changed their position and agreed that there is racism in the department as they heard other participants confidently qualify incidents similar to what they themselves had observed as evidence of racism.

Note also that most also firmly qualify the racism in the department as "systemic". Many back-up this claim by the obvious lack of representation of racial diversity in the upper echelons of the department. However, as will be illustrated in the next section, participants also site multiple other reasons to believe there are systemic causes of racism in the department.

It is worth noting that the non-racialized employees who chose to lend their voices to this initiative corroborate these perspectives that racism at IRCC is existent, widespread and systemic, having themselves been witness to incidents of micro-aggressions as well as biases in hiring and promotion practices. The examples they share are included throughout this summary as well.

A few participants mention that cronyism and a powerful "old-boys network" is very much a part of an embedded culture at IRCC.

Examples of the types of racism experienced at IRCC

Participants shared a large number of incidents of racism they either personally experienced or witnessed and many corroborated the types of experiences described by others as well, suggesting patterns of behaviour and speech that are recurring and occur throughout the organisation.

What follows is a sampling of some of the types of incidents mentioned as well as certain details to help the reader understand context and impact. Note that some of the details provided to us are withheld or dissimulated in order to protect anonymity.

Note also that, most participants say they do not feel they are in a safe environment to speak out against racism. Fear of reprisal or of being labelled as a troublemaker or difficult is widespread and there is a belief that complaints, whether against superiors or peers are not dealt with adequately if at all, that they often leave the complainant feeling more uncomfortable and that management is not equipped to deal with racism complaints

Micro aggressions and negative comments

Inappropriate, insensitive and hurtful comments happen often at IRCC and can include:

- Comments and gestures aimed at specific employees and groups of employees that make racialized employees feel like an "other", highlighting differences or proliferate racist tropes (note that several of the micro-aggressions mentioned were attributed not only to peers but also to people in a supervisory capacity, underscoring a belief that unconscious biases can and do make their way into hiring, promotion and business delivery practices at IRCC), for example

  o Having certain parts of the organization where representation of racialized employees is high referred to by non-racialized employees and supervisors as "the ghetto"

  o Racialized employees being asked not only the much-lamented separateness-inducing question "where are you from?" but also an IRCC specific variant: "how did you get here?"

  o A person in power making derogatory and lewd comments about physical characteristics of "black girls" while speaking to a black female employee

  o A manager saying Indigenous people are lazy

  o A manager who, when speaking to a participant referring to one of their employees they were hoping to take disciplinary action against, "*you know how black men are*"

  o A manager who repeatedly greets all the employees in the unit except the black ones as they walk through the unit

  o Asking to touch someone's hair, or making fun of or passing judgements on someone's hair (e.g., a person in a supervisory capacity telling a black employee that their afro looks unprofessional, or joking about an employee's hairdo in a team meeting)

  o Bandying around discriminatory or derogatory comments or appellations disguised as terms of endearment or jokes with the effect of promoting, justifying or defending the use of hurtful language, for example

    ▪ Greeting a black colleague with "Salut, ma noire"

    ▪ After a workshop in which an outside presenter told of being referred to as a "paki" when younger, a white manager repeatedly and seemingly jokingly, referred to their South Asian employee as Paki, and only stopped after a complaint to their superior, but with no apology or recognition of impact

    ▪ "My manager keeps namasté-ing me at work. I try to tell myself not to take it personally, like maybe they are just into yoga or something, but it's exhausting…if you bring it up they make you feel like you are the crazy one…it's like constantly being gaslighted at work"

- Widely used and heard generalisations about client groups that can be hurtful or leave employees aware of negative judgements that apply to people like them, for example

    - Widespread internal references to certain African nations as "the dirty 30"

    - Stereotyping Nigerians as particularly corrupt or untrustworthy (note, such negative stereotypes were mentioned about certain other immigrant groups as well, but Nigerians were cited as an example particularly often)

    - A manager referring to Latin American applicants as people who just come here to collect social insurance

The emotional impact and accumulated trauma of micro-aggressions

When talking about micro-aggressions, we asked participants, where possible, to articulate the immediate emotional and accumulated impact of these incidents which can sometimes be dismissed as trivial among other organizational priorities but which we also know can contribute to a climate of tolerance and silence. What follows are just a few examples of what we heard.

- "It's funny, it's very emotional to bring back all these memories. I feel sometimes it's so subtle and so systemic you'll never know if its racism at a systemic level or not, so you are always wondering"

- [One participant referring to a personally targeted derogatory comment from a supervisor, after we asked what they did about the situation and what prevented them from responding immediately]: "When you are addressed like this, it is so overwhelmingly shocking, you retire to your corner to figure out what to do"

- "Because I'm white passing, people are more permissive about making comments around me. And you bring it home. You are thinking about these comments later. Its heaviness I take home with me everyday"

- [Non-racialized employee referring to a situation where in a closed circle of non-racialized colleagues, a manager was stereotyping and mocking certain racialized employees] "it was completely inappropriate and then they looked at me and saw the stunned reaction on my face and said 'is that okay?' as if to challenge me like, do you have a problem with that? I felt pushed up against a wall. It felt gross"

- [Non-racialized employee describing the experience of such situations in the confinement context of Zoom meetings] "in the office, when some of these conversations are happening, you can just walk away. Online it's hard. You're just stuck there"

- A team leader having a conversation on the floor, loudly enough for the racialized employees to hear, saying colonialism was good and if the "natives" wanted the land they

should have just stood up. And when one non-racialized employee tried to speak up about the inappropriateness of the comment the team leader asked them "what, are you native?"

Suppression of cultural or ethnic identity

- While only a few specific examples of conscious efforts to suppress one's cultural or ethnic identity were raised, many reported experiencing feeling different in ways that were uncomfortable and a desire to not feel as much of a schism based on race in the workplace. This sometimes took the following forms:

  - Being reminded of the stereotypes and beliefs held by non-racialized peers and people in power based on some of the micro-aggressions and negative comments mentioned in the previous section

  - Choosing not to speak out against micro-aggressions for fear of being shunned by peers or retaliated against by people in power

    - "now that I'm speaking out, am I also going to be looked like as one of those angry black women for speaking up?"

  - For racialized employees who have progressed into higher levels of the organization and find themselves alone as the only non-racialized person among their peers

    - A belief that it is important not to speak up or make waves

  - For mixed race or lighter skinned/less visibly "different" employees, sometimes finding themselves in the position of being witness to racism or included in an "inner circle" by non-racialized employees, and experiencing the inner conflict of having to decide whether or not to speak up and, hence, feel excluded and different again, for example:

    - "[as someone who is mixed race] I have my own form of privilege. I have a dark-skinned co-worker, we came in together and I have seen myself promoted while they are as competent as me but got left behind and not offered training opportunities, not included on those emails. I don't know how to process that. And we are close, and yet I feel like I am part of the system that is perpetrating it, and I take that home with me every day because it's so obvious that its racism, but if I say anything will they pay the price…"

Biases in the hiring processes (advertising, screening, testing, interview board representation, selection)

- Participants highlight a number of biases in hiring and selection

o Several racialized participants recount incidents of having passed quantitative evaluations for selection and then having threshold scores raised after the fact (or being told that that was the reason they never made it to the interview stage)

o On manager reports having their evaluation of a racialized employee overridden by someone above them to promote a non-racialized employee instead

o One mentions that a large number of Indigenous People drop off the hiring process at the interview stage

o Many agree screening tests are culturally biased and almost require insider training to know how to produce the types of answers required to score

Biases in the identification of individuals for development opportunities and advancement

Participants share a large number of specific situations they consider to be clear indicators of bias in access to personal development and promotional opportunities including

• Racialized employees not being informed about opportunities for training, development and upward mobility on the same basis as non-racialized peers

• Discrimination in access to language training (which impact immigrants more as English/French is often already their second language)

• Such a high percentage of the internal diversity being in regional processing offices, managers there have no incentive to help employees promote out and into another office and, since evaluations are based on high productivity output goals, are less likely to be willing to free employee time (and their own budgets) for professional development or language training

• Fewer acting opportunities being given to racialized employees

• Racialized employees being kept in acting positions for a long time without ever moving past that

• Racialized employees being kept in precarious temporary contract positions disproportionately and for a long time which keeps them from advocating for their own rights to professional progression or even for speaking up against incidences of racism they contend with for fear of reprisal or being labelled as difficult or a troublemaker

• Restrictions to allowing unionized employees to attend certain management meetings which prevents them from learning the work needed to progress

• One participant in a customer service unit shared how over the course of several years, they personally progressed 4 levels from an entry level position to a supervisory role within the unit only to subsequently be demoted back to entry level after having raised concerns about racial

discrimination in access to professional development, advancement and disciplinary action that they were a witness to while part of the supervisory team.

- A few participants, in different units, share that their supervisors had asked them to watch for and report on behaviours by colleagues of the same race as them, in order to help the supervisor mount a case for disciplinary action. In some cases, these participants balked at the fact that they were asked to do this, not only because they did not know these colleagues well and felt they were being asked to do this for the sole reasons that they were of the same race, as though it were assumed that they would necessarily be close. They also felt it inappropriate because they were not hierarchically above these colleagues and therefore had no authority to be part of such a process.

Biases in IRCC's programs, policy and client service

- Concern that increased automation of processing will embed racially discriminatory practices in a way that will be hard to see over time

- Concern raised by high refusal rates for particular countries or regions

    o "Nigeria has an 80% refusal rate but it's an oil producing country with relatively well-educated, well-off population"

How management handles racism in the workplace

Only two participants mentioned positive examples of how management has handled racism. In both cases, they referred to managers who have set an example of being willing to admit their own mistakes and being willing to apologize, hence promoting an environment where awareness grows, and conversations are easier to have without judgement

What we heard more generally was:

    o Participants do not believe there are currently any consequences for racism or racist behaviour at IRCC

    o That there does not seem to be any specific process or guidelines that management has been given on how to deal with racism incidents when brought up

    o That management often reacts defensively, precluding them from being part of the solution

        o "I'm shaking [to bring it up] and then they start crying and so now you have to manage and console them"

    o That incidents, if dealt with, seem to be done so only through a "slap on the wrist" consisting of a conversation with management and being told not to do it again or sending them for training

- There seems to be no lasting accountability for those accused of racism, many of whom go on to be promoted

    - One mentions that this is true for other types of issues as well, using an example of a non-racially motivated harassment issue having been dealt with the perpetrator being told to simple stay away from the complainant, who was therefore left with a longer lasting uncomfortable workplace environment, rather than having that person removed…. which leave the participant believing that racism would clearly not be handled any better

- Complainants are not given any feedback on what if anything was done

- That the general belief that the organization is an "old-boys network" with many "protected people" dissuades people from even trying

- That there is a strong hierarchical structure, with people being discouraged from even emailing higher ups because (they are higher ups) which creates a sense that there is no one to turn to if the problem is with management

- The Office of conflict resolution is there to provide information for how to make a complaint but has no power to act

Belief in the commitment to anti-racism

While a few participants say they do believe there is a real commitment to anti-racism at the DM level (with a few participants mentioning the DMA by name as someone who is more likely to be serious in her commitment to resolving the problem) and that they are somewhat heartened at the creation of the Anti-Racism Task force and few initiatives and communications on the topic they have seen - including the holding of these focus groups which a few indicate are a level of depth of inquiry they have not seen before at IRCC - the vast majority are skeptical. Because:

- they believe the problem is so deep rooted in the organizational culture and in the hands of people in power who have been there for a long time and are not likely to change

- they believe the resources and initiatives deployed so far this year are temporary, insufficient and very poorly funded

- there is a natural tendency for management to favour staff that they are comfortable with and resemble them so the lack of racial diversity in management is a limiting factor, with no incentive to management to counter that

- there are systemic barriers to promoting racial diversity into management, including lack of access to acting opportunities and training as well as evaluation practices that are not sufficiently impervious to bias

- o There is no known safe mechanism for reporting racism and an organizational reputation for lack of action when it is reported, as well as a high risk of reprisals

- o they believe the racism and profiling inherent in immigration policy are both symptoms and propagators of racist internal attitudes and perceptions that affect how employees are dealt with as well

Potential Solutions

- The notion of "best fit" in hiring and promotional practices leaves a lot of room for subjectivity

- Provide training or guidelines (or even mentorship or coaching for racialized candidates) to prepare for hiring tests and interviews

- Extend candidate searches for management positions to cities with more diverse populations to compensate for the more limited diversity pool in the NCR (with possible support for relocation)

- Creating a mentorship system to help racialized employees navigate the path to promotion

- Create clear objectives for promoting racialized employees throughout the organisation and incentivising management for achieving these objectives

  - o "without more people of color in management there can be no sustainability of anti-racism efforts"

- Analysing internal data for racial representation in a number of areas to identify where to target biases:

  - o hiring interview participation and success rate

  - o contract time (casual, indeterminate, temporary, etc.) by race and level

  - o Time holding each type of contract status by race

  - o Referrals for professional development and language training

- Racial representation at all levels of the organization

- There needs to be a way to report incidents and provide feedback anonymously

- Creating a permanent anti-racism ombudsman

- It's important to provide managers with training on how to handle complaints or even employees having the courage to address with them racist comments or behaviours that they,

themselves, may have been part of without management feeling defensive because employees hold back from reporting due to the effort required in managing the emotions of others.

- It's important to create a culture in which there is recognition that everyone is prone to racism so people can have their own racist behaviors or comments called out without taking it personally or seeing the word racism as signalling a catastrophic extreme

  o To be able to have conversations without necessarily demonizing perpetrators. (one participant suggests having all employees at all levels sign onto an anti-racism in the workplace commitment that mandates that racist incidents including micro-aggressions are brought up immediately and directly with the perpetrator in a spirit of recognising bias as a society wide problem and open dialog as a way to break the cycle… "that way you are speaking up not against the person but in honor of a commitment you made to the organisation"

Further comments on:

Racism in international assignments

Participants that have experienced international assignments with IRCC report:

- That racially discriminatory comments and behaviours are heard more often during assignments internationally and are on a scale that is more blatantly shocking.

  o Employees and people in power in international assignments often remain offshore for years, moving from posting to posting and are "really far away from the Canadian Zeitgeist" when it comes to values and initiatives around anti-racism.

- That in international assignments, there is no protection or process allowing employees to report discrimination or harassment and more cronyism among a small corps of powerful people who protect each other.

- That discriminatory comments about and treatment of locally engaged staff is rampant and often contrary to what would be considered acceptable in a Canadian workplace. This creates an additional layer of discomfort for racialized employees in these assignments who find themselves having to "uber-Canadianise" themselves to be included as a member of the "inner circle" of expats on the ground, while also being exposed to racist comments that are particularly difficult to hear given their reflection of how they themselves may be seen by their colleagues.

  o "At IRCC, I have learned racist slurs that I didn't even know before coming to work here."

- Also, as mentioned previously, employees who have held international assignments shared a number of circumstances where they were felt excluded or discriminated against by non-racialized off-shore peers and supervisors and torn between wanting to be "included" as part of the Canadian staff and witness to discrimination against local staff

  - "I came [to the international assignment] with someone who was white and they would get invited and welcomed and taken around and I didn't. It changed me as a person"

  - "I would be excluded from meetings and social events where they would forget to invite the non-white staff"

- In terms of *biases in the identification of individuals for development opportunities and advancement*, participants felt that racialized employees are only being offered the difficult, less attractive developing country postings

- In terms of *potential solutions*, participants proposed that IRCC should increase management skills competencies required for foreign service supervisory roles

- As a side note on the impacts of racism particularly in international assignments, one participant shared avoiding posting to parts to the world aligned with their own racial background in order to avoid the increased exposure to painful racism targeted at their race, with potential implications for IRCCs ability to mobilize its diverse workforce to areas where they could help foster mutual understanding and rapprochement.

Circle for Visible Minorities

The vast majority of participants had not heard of the circle for visible minorities. Among those who had heard of CVM, it was mainly pointed to as an example of what does not work or what is not wanted with an anti-racism or racism mitigation initiative, though many of the participants making these comments admit their exposure to CVM is limited and may not reflect the entire picture of what CVM represents. The following key concerns were raised:

- Lack of presence/representation/involvement in the anti-racism initiatives underway

- Lack of resources (people, money)

- Non responsive (mentioned by someone who had reached out to CVM and not had any response)

- Lack of power to impact decisions, and one person felt it was too embedded with management to militate for change

- o Another place for racialized employees to talk among themselves when the need is to get the message and change to happen at the level of non-racialized employees and management: "Too much focus on talk and not action"

IRCC permanently establishing an Anti-Racism Secretariat

Not strongly endorsed as a key solution. To the extent that this involves permanent funding, that is a good thing.

- o Some participants seem unclear as to what exactly being a Secretariat would represent in terms of mandate and power.

- o Some also mention that it depends on who is running it and making decisions

- o There is wariness that this could constitute a simple gesture and hence provide the perception of progress without anything on the ground changing

Rate my manager approach or 360-degree feedback

It became clear early that it was hard for participants to express themselves clearly on this without further details on how that would be done, and so, in interest of time we did not ask this in all groups.

It does appear that there is some initial skepticism that is probably couched in the existing distrust of management and climate of fear of reprisals and ease of falling in and out of favor.

New qualification requirements to become an Executive (i.e. intercultural competency) or different ways to assess leaders within a hiring process

Participants' comments suggest that there is generally a belief that management lacks training, processes and resources to recognize and counter the impact of their own unconscious biases and that cronyism does result in issues at the level of management competencies. So, based on the overall conversation it does appear that this would be an important part of solutions moving forward

Mandatory review of policies, practices and procedures for systematic biases and racism, similar to gender analysis

This idea was well received and supported by the vast majority of participants. In some groups, it was even brought forward proactively by participants.