

jasonlee

# What everyone wants to know

## The questions I get asked most often





## What's Happening Everyone?

If you've found your way here, I assume you might know a bit about my story. Hopefully, you'll know me as a footballer who played for the likes of Nottingham Forest over my 20+ year playing career. Or, you might have seen a racist portrayal of me on '90s 'comedy' show, Fantasy Football League. Either way, I'm glad to connect.

Spurred on by my own experiences of racism at work, I've spent the last ten years working to improve Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) across football. In my role at football's trade union, I helped spearhead the #Enough campaign and their ground-breaking study into [Racial Bias In Football Commentary](#), before providing nationwide language training for sports journalists and broadcasters. I also regularly speak about football and racism in the national media and sit on Nottingham Forest's Community Trust Board and The FA Women's Board.



These days, I host my **AbsoluteLee podcast** and deliver EDI talks and workshops for organisations across sports, public services, community organisations and multinational corporates.

When I'm out doing EDI work, people often ask similar questions, so I've collated some of the things I'm asked most – along with my answers - to give an insight into some of the important conversations we're having out here!



# How do we challenge microaggressions in the workplace?

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**First, give yourself permission to process what has happened in your own time.**

Then, reflect on the incident to figure out whether it was an isolated event or part of a pattern and make a detailed record of what happened, including the date, time, location, people involved and any witnesses so all the info is at hand if you decide to raise the issue formally.



It can be hard to speak out against someone in the workplace, especially if they're in a position of power, so I would encourage you to talk to a trusted colleague, friend or family member about your experiences so they can offer emotional support, help you gain perspective and provide some input on how to address the situation.

If you feel safe and comfortable doing so, you can approach the person who made the microaggression, share your feelings and explain the impact of their comments or actions. They may not be aware of the harm they caused, and a calm, constructive conversation could lead to greater awareness. However, if you need a more formal intervention, you should raise the issue with the appropriate channels and maybe ask your organisation to invest in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training so the whole team can learn how to create a better company culture for everyone.

# How do professional footballers feel about gay players in the men's game?



**The players say, 'We're ready'. It's the world that isn't ready.**

As part of my work, I get to speak to lots of young players about equality, and honestly, the young footballers I've spoken to about this are shocked that we're still having this conversation because there's never an issue for them when there's a gay footballer in the dressing room.

We know that there are most likely current players who aren't publicly 'out', and I firmly believe we need to make sure they're protected and supported if and when they decide to take that step. Everyone plays a part in making football a safe space for LGBT+ players and fans to exist, and it's a shame that that isn't yet the case. Research suggests that 2-5% of the male population in the UK identifies as gay. I played for 18 clubs, each with roughly 25-30 players. You do the maths. I must've played alongside and against gay footballers. It's just sad that the support wasn't there if any of them had wanted to share that part of their lives at the time.

# What's being done to combat the abuse professional players receive on social media?

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**Over the years, I've had several meetings with the big social giants, but not enough is being done truthfully.**

It's apparent from these meetings that their community guidelines are insufficient because when someone's name is trending, a hashtag is being used, or someone's getting an onslaught of abuse on social media, the social networks benefit. The more people active on these sites, even if it is toxic, the less inclined they are to make the change.

Instead, they put the responsibility on the user to report abuse, block accounts and mute certain words, but that's not enough in my opinion. Legislation needs to change, and the Online Harms Bill has been passed recently, so we need to see what impact that has. These platforms have to become safer for anyone who has experienced abuse on social media. I've been supporting organisations working to develop a safer social media platform where all users need verified ID, and we've run several campaigns highlighting the issue at the PFA. While that won't end the problem, it gets people to listen, and that's a start.wvew



## What are your thoughts on the women's game?



**The women's game has a long way to go, but as someone who sits on The FA Women's Board and has been a massive supporter of women's football, I can't lie it's been amazing to see the progress in the last few years.**

I was at nearly every game at the women's Euros in 2022, and the support at that tournament was just next level. But we need more than fan support to get the sport where it needs to be.

It's been great to see big moves happening off the pitch, both for former players and women involved in football in a non-playing capacity. Forest Green Rovers appointed Hannah Dingley as their caretaker manager at the end of last season, and she remains the only woman to have overseen a male professional football team. She was also the first woman to coach a men's academy at the same club, and their chairman, Dale Vince, said it was simply because she was the most qualified person at the time. That's how things should work, in my opinion, and I think they'll most likely be the first club to hire a permanent female manager of the men's team.

# What do you think about 'unprofessional' hairstyles in the workplace?

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**There needs to be a real shift in what we consider 'unprofessional'.**

C'mon, it's 2023! Companies and people need to be more open-minded about what is and isn't 'professional', especially when hairstyle restrictions are usually rooted in racism. No one should feel ashamed to show up as themselves in their workplace, and if we're being real, these ideas about professionalism are outdated and take a very Euro-centric view of what 'professional' looks like. I will never understand how someone's lock, braids or afro could impact the level of work and value people can contribute to an organisation.

I faced many issues when I had locks - not just due to the 'comedy' show that famously mocked me, representing my hair as a pineapple, but also from managers who felt that I 'should cut my hair'. I know this is something many Black and mixed heritage people experience across sectors, and who were being abused with the same words in their own lives that I was being abused with on the pitch. So this is something I feel strongly about.

When it comes to these kinds of issues, I work with the decision-makers and the people who can create change at the top of organisations because their mindsets get filtered down throughout the company structure. If this discrimination is happening in the workplace, some serious work needs to be done to address EDI, and to create environments where we recognise, appreciate and accept our differences.



# How can we be better allies in the workplace?

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## Ask the people in your team who might need your allyship.

There's no template for it, so you should always start by asking people if and what kind of support they might need from you and be ready to accept if they say they're fine as they are.

Then you need to start doing the work.



This means improving your general understanding of social justice issues, minoritised communities and protected characteristics so you know when and how to support colleagues or employees who might need you to. Don't be afraid to ask questions, but you've got to be courteous, respectful and polite. I'd say most of the time, if you respectfully let a colleague know you have a question, they're likely to help you learn – but to be clear, this isn't their responsibility. Context is important. Timing is important. Approach is very, very important.

Don't demand information, don't put people on the spot in front of others, and honestly, don't expect them to answer things you can easily find out yourself – Google is your friend. You should always ask if they're comfortable speaking to you about your question before launching straight in, but I think we want to get to a place where these conversations feel less taboo. It's great to facilitate workshops that allow space for these conversations to happen safely and learn how we can all be more accountable.



# Have you forgiven David Baddiel?

**I faced unrelenting racist abuse because of David Baddiel's blackface portrayal of me on mainstream TV, and its impact continues today. It took him more than 25 years to approach me directly for a conversation, but it's done now.**



I'm glad I gave him the opportunity to apologise, and I have accepted his apology. But actions speak louder than words, so I need to see him continue to do the work to make sure he understands what he apologised for. It's easy to say sorry, but now he needs to keep demonstrating that his apology was sincere and that he's learnt from the experience.

To be clear, while I've accepted David's apology it doesn't mean everyone else whose lives were impacted by those sketches should automatically forgive. I've heard from people over the years who were bullied at school or work with the same taunts I experienced because of that show.

People seem unwilling to listen to his message about Antisemitism because of his very public history of anti-Black racism. In terms of allyship, I stand with David in calling out Antisemitism. No-one should feel that their experiences of racism are overlooked. I believe that minoritised communities are stronger when we stand together, and I support any person speaking out on behalf of their community as long as we commit to the needs of other groups too.

**I think we did some justice to a complicated conversation on my podcast, and it's definitely worth a [listen](#) or [watch](#). Let us know your thoughts!**

# DOING THE WORK

As you can see from the questions I get asked the most, creating an inclusive company culture takes work. And I'm a big fan of doing the work.

It can be hard to know where to start and it takes time to get it right, but you don't have to do it alone. As an experienced practitioner, I speak, facilitate and consult on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging challenges for a wide variety of organisations sharing insights informed by my unique story and extensive professional experience.

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If you'd like me to speak at your event, lead workshops or support any other Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging initiatives, get in touch on [info@absolutelee.co.uk](mailto:info@absolutelee.co.uk)

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