

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Things Change, Like It or Not

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Thirty-some years ago, the comedienne Lily Tomlin had a very popular character named Ernestine who was a bossy, snooty, disrespectful, and cranky telephone operator. When dealing with unhappy customers, she would snort with derision and remind them that they were dealing with the phone company, an institution that didn't care about the customer's complaint because AT&T was "omnipotent." Though she pops up from time to time in Lily's work today, Ernestine retired from her switchboard "duty desk," hopefully before her once powerful employer was no longer considered to be omnipotent. Today, it's simply not the same AT&T. It's been broken up, sold, changed, and must now compete with other communication giants. Things change, even those things like AT&T that we believed never would. That has certainly been true in my life.

The early days of my childhood were spent proudly and happily in Flint, Michigan, once a beautiful, thriving automobile capitol, now a dismal place that plans to plow under many of its neighborhoods because they are considered abandoned eyesores that only contribute to the city's reputation of being a wasteland.

For most of my life, my father worked at the largest, most prestigious and respected corporation in the world, General Motors, which is based in Detroit. As the Director of Institutional Operations in the department of public relations, he was generally greeted by the host of New York's 21 Club with "Hello, Mr. McNaught. How are Buicks selling?" My father is now dead, General Motors is on life support, and Detroit is on a suicide watch.

When I moved to Boston, I worked for the most powerful man in the city, a political icon who made the Hub an international attraction. Intimidating most people with his sharp mind, Kevin White was talked of as a future U.S. President. He is now being accommodated by his few friends because he has Alzheimer's.

The love of my life, Ray, worked long days and nights throughout his career for one of the most highly-respected firms on Wall Street. As a managing director of a financial institution with a long, rich history and tradition, he wouldn't have considered working anywhere else. Now, Lehman Brothers no longer exists, nor does Ray's retirement program.

All of us have heard stories about people who, because of the world financial meltdown, have been forced to downsize their lives -- to get rid of their household staff, their second homes, and their three cars. A year ago, some of them imagined that they were "special," perhaps better than common folk. The world was divided between the "haves" and the "have nots." Because of newfound wealth, they were temporarily "haves." Now, they're "have nots."

Nothing stays the same. Everything changes, often against our wills. But sometimes the changes are good, which is why those of us who are working hard to create safe and productive environments for everyone in the workplace would do well to celebrate each day the advances we are making, and

not get discouraged by the seemingly insurmountable obstacles we face. These include our global financial insecurity, or a diversity-averse CEO, or the cultural wars we witness taking place in our workplace. If we are patient, things will change. The economy will recover. The CEO will be replaced with one who is more enlightened. And the current cultural wars will end or shift to another issue. Gay marriage is a good example. The chasm between gay employees and some religious conservative employees is shrinking despite what we may see on the Internet.

On YouTube today, you can watch a few highly emotional warnings against gay marriage. The number has increased because of the significant advances that have been made in the United States and the world to provide gay and lesbian couples the same legal status as heterosexual couples. One such emotional YouTube clip, created by the Iowa Family Policy Center in response to the unanimous decision by that state's Supreme Court that gay people had the constitutional right to marry, features the very likable couple Karl and Judy Schowengerdt whose gay son Randy died of HIV. Karl and Judy insist that gay marriage hurts heterosexual families because Karl never would have been gay had he not been "actively recruited" by the homosexual community. Your heart breaks for them, particularly because they see themselves and their son as victims, when, in fact, had Randy's homosexuality been initially embraced by his parents, he might have ended up in a gay marriage that matched in length and happiness that of his folks.

Like yesterday's Edsel and today's Pontiac, the arguments of the Schowengerdts against gay marriage are nearly extinct. The Republican Party is being advised by its younger members, as is the Evangelical Church, to drop the issue of gay marriage and to move on to things that really impact the lives of people, such as divorce, poverty, injustice, and the environment. Even Dr. Laura Schlesinger, the conservative talk show host who once led the battle against gay marriage, has changed her tune and now feels that such marriages would be good for society. Things change, sometimes for the better.

The lesson we all have the opportunity to learn in the midst of all of this dramatic economic and cultural change is that it is dangerous to be smug like Ernestine, the telephone operator. Things come and go. Attitudes change. Nothing in this life is omnipotent. So, we might as well be present to and enjoy our family, home, job, town, car, financial situation, health, faith, and the environment because what is here today can be gone tomorrow.