

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

The Script to My Drama

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When I told my pain management doctor that I was heading to Tokyo and India to work with Merrill, he asked me if "Merrill" was my sister. Sometimes we can get so wrapped up in our own dramas we forget that not everyone has seen our script.

Merrill is Merrill Lynch, the investment banking firm, more accurately known today as Bank of America/Merrill Lynch. My sisters' names, for the record, are Kathy and Maureen. They are not coming with me to Asia. Ray is.

The script for this trip is well worth seeing. The synopsis is that Merrill Lynch and Goldman Sachs are bringing me to Japan to work with their senior executives on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues. After two presentations in Tokyo, I am going with Merrill to Mumbai for another groundbreaking talk with their senior executives in India.

For me and others working on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues, the invitation by Merrill and Goldman is enormously significant. These historic talks are the first efforts being made by corporations to ensure that their workplaces in those cultures are as welcoming for gay and transgender people as they are in New York, Toronto, or London. Besides the immediate effect of building the confidence and competence of the senior managers in my trainings, there is great potential for rippling effects upon diversity efforts in other local companies, as well as on attitudes in the culture. A person educated about gay and transgender people is more likely to be an ally when someone comes out in the family or the neighborhood.

As I have prepared for this maiden voyage, I have thought less about tailoring my message than I have of the social customs of my hosts. I suspect that the script of my talk is known to the members of my audiences, even if it has never been given voice in their workplaces. What most people lack is permission to discuss the topics, an understanding of how they are workplace issues, and the confidence to engage in conversations because they are unfamiliar with the proper terminology. I am skilled at providing them guidance in these areas. Where I have needed help is in not unintentionally offending the members of my audiences before I open my mouth.

One of the ways that I have increased my cultural competence before boarding my upcoming flight to Tokyo is to speak at length with Kenji Yoshino, author of *Covering – The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*, who is also the esteemed Chief Justice Earl Warren Professor of Constitutional Law at New York University School of Law. After hearing Kenji's keynote address at last year's Out and Equal conference, I asked for his mentoring. We exchanged business cards, and I later took him up on his offer to help.

My questions for Kenji were basic—and perhaps painfully predictable:

- Do I respectfully bow or shake hands? (Follow the lead of the person with whom you are talking.)
- How do I give and receive business cards? (Hold your card with two hands and give it to the other person with your name facing him or her. Receive the other person's card with two hands. Look at it, and do not stick it into your pocket.)
- Will Japanese members of my audience give me non-verbal feedback?
- Will they participate in discussions?
- What is the influence of religion in Japan?
- Are there generational differences in attitudes?
- What impact does religion have on attitudes?
- Do Japanese workers talk at work about their private lives?

In addition to speaking to Kenji, I also talked at length with gay people at Merrill Lynch and Goldman Sachs about their experiences as Westerners in Japan. My file folder is filled with notes from those conversations, as well as material from the Internet.

I have more work to do in researching attitudes and customs in India, though I have a good story from my own experience that will be instructive to the audience there.

Many years ago, when I was speaking predominantly on college campuses, my friend Toby Simon invited me to speak to her class in human sexuality at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. A young Indian man seated in the front row smiled as he tape-recorded my presentation. When I finished speaking, he raised his hand and excitedly told me that he was gay and his sister was lesbian. "My parents in India don't know we're gay, and they don't know anything about homosexuality. I'm going to take this home and play it for them."

There will be men and women in my audiences in Tokyo and in Mumbai who have gay and transgender children—whether or not they are aware of them—or know anything about homosexuality. The wonderful happy ending of the dramatic script of my work is that regardless of the country or the culture in which I am engaged, knowledge enables people to respond to their children and to their workplace colleagues with wisdom and understanding. This has certainly been true with my sisters Kathy and Maureen, as well as with Merrill.

In a few weeks, I will report on what Ray and I experienced on our trip to Japan and India. Until the first of May then, I respectfully bow out.