

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Bad First Impressions

Posted: 22 Feb 2011, 8:51PM

Negative first impressions of a person different from ourselves can be frightening. They can easily reinforce our stereotypes of an entire group, unless we already have a wealth of personal experiences that tell us the individual is an exception to the rule, and not an example of it.

This week, I received the following message from a self-identified "Trans-activist" in Kenya.

"You are a disturbed and deranged gay man. Who do you think [you] are? Why do you have to pit us against heterosexuals? Don't you even know most of us are straight/heterosexuals? You think the oppression that transgender people face comes from heterosexuals? You are a moron.

The problem with you people is you adopt a messiah complex coupled with a know it all attitude that hurts our course. Stay out of our way or I will get a mallet and pound some sense up your butt."

I have no idea what triggered her anger. My initial reaction was to become defensive, to personalize her words, and to feel less comfortable with my own transgender activism. But that would have been a big mistake.

Audrey Mbugua, as I found out, uses the word "moron" a lot in her writing and interviews in Kenya. She doesn't take any prisoners.

The first mistake that a person can make when encountering an angry individual like Audrey is to jump to the conclusion that every transgender person is like her. In the workplace, sometimes there might be just one transsexual. If he or she happens to be a difficult individual to work with, it is not helpful or wise to make assumptions based on that one person. I once experienced this at a worksite where even the gay and lesbian members of the Employee Resource Group had difficulty getting past the transgender woman's personality when they were strategizing their priorities with management.

The limited personal awareness most people have of transgender men and women in our culture takes its toll on our community's ability to achieve our goal of creating a world in which transsexuals, intersexuals, and other transgender people feel safe and valued. This will change with time, as more and more transgender people put faces on the issues.

For many years, most heterosexuals had limited awareness of, and personal contact with, gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. If there was a newspaper account of an arrest of a man soliciting sex in a public restroom, straight people assumed that it was typical behavior, and expected the same of all gay men. Cinema portrayals of butch prison matrons were believed to represent all lesbians. But as gay men, lesbians, and bisexual people started putting faces on the issue in every segment of society,

attitudes changed. Few people today read about a gay man being murdered at home by a hustler and think negatively of their married gay son and his spouse.

Many years ago, when we were giving straight allies tours of gay bars so they might better understand the limited options gay men and women had to socialize, there was a guy sitting on a stool with his genitals pulled out of his shorts for others to admire. After the tour, a Catholic nun pulled me aside and whispered, "Brian is that typical?" Because it was her first experience of a gay bar, and she had limited experience of gay men, the gay man's exposed genitals was what she saw and would most remember. As she continued educating herself about gay people, and continued to meet more and more gay men and women, her memory of the exposed flaccid penis and testicles took on a more humorous tone.

I know too many wonderful transsexual men and women to have my thoughts and feelings impacted by the trans-activist from Kenya. I assume that her experiences educating her fellow citizens are very different from my own. There may not be a political union of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in Kenya—no "LGBT" to speak of. Maybe there the "LGBs" are seen as obstacles to her success as a heterosexual transsexual. Her message to me didn't invite such dialogue, but I did respond.

"I understand, Audrey, that you are from Kenya, and I can't claim to know what your experiences there might be. My experience here, though, is that most transgender people, regardless of their sexual orientation, see themselves as kindred souls to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in our march to freedom. I also understand that you are an activist in Kenya. I applaud the passion, if not the tone, you bring to your work."

We all need to be better exposed to the transgender people in our lives, as well as to all those who are different from ourselves.