

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

The Dilemma of Being Out & Invisible

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Perhaps a discussion of the oppression gay men and women face around the corporate water cooler seems insignificant when compared to more outrageous examples of the day: the proposed legislation in Uganda that calls for imprisonment and death for gay and HIV-positive people, the arrest of a gay couple in Malawi simply for having an engagement party, the Gestapo tactics of the Atlanta and Fort Worth police in their recent raids of gay bars in those cities, among other atrocities. Certainly in comparison to the blatant homophobia I witnessed in the workplace when I first began diversity training there 25 years ago, leaving gay people out of social discussions is far less physically and emotionally threatening. But everything is relative to the context in which it occurs.

Corporations with perfect scores on the Human Rights Campaign's [Corporate Equality Index](#), or who score highly on Stonewall's [similar rating system](#) in the United Kingdom, are assuring their gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees that they want them to feel safe and valued in the workplace. So, a promise has been made; a new standard has been set. Heterosexual employees are expected to be proactively inclusive of gay and transgender employees, just as white employees are expected to be proactively inclusive of people of color. If a black man or a Latina woman was left out of social talk in the office on Monday morning, he or she wouldn't feel as safe at work as they do among friends at home. That is contrary to the goals, promises, and expectations of their employers.

The biggest complaint I hear from gay and transgender employees in the firms I work with today is that when they come out they often feel marginalized, even invisible, by the discomfort their heterosexual colleagues have engaging them in conversation. These gay and transgender employees don't expect to have their coworkers come to the office and speak out strongly about what's happening to gay people in Uganda, Malawi, or in almost every Muslim country. They simply want to be asked about the picture of them and their loved ones they have as screen savers on their computers, or the framed photos of their families in their cubicles.

Teaching heterosexual and non-transgender employees how to actively engage their gay and transgender colleagues in the full life of the workplace is an important task faced by corporate offices of Human Resources and of Diversity and Inclusion. Here, for consideration, is a typical scenario that provides an opportunity to plan a course of action.

Scenario

Four employees are standing around on Monday morning talking about their weekends.

Tom is a heterosexual, married, white male in his fifties. He has been with the firm for 20 years.

Richard is a 44-year-old black man who has a male spouse of 10 years. He has worked for the firm for five years and has been out to his colleagues since his arrival.

Samir is a 45-year-old man from India who has been in the U.S. for 10 years, the same amount of time he has been with the firm.

Cheryl is a 30-year-old single, white woman who has worked for the firm for eight years.

The group is standing in front of Richard's desk, on the center of which is his computer. The screensaver on the computer is a photograph of Richard and his white male spouse, Edward, taken on their wedding day a year ago.

"Have you all seen that new sci-fi flick that's so popular? My wife and I saw it over the weekend and it's great," Tom says. "It's not a chick flick, Cheryl—oh, maybe it is. There's a love story but there's also a lot of heavy-duty fighting."

"Edward and I saw it, Tom," Richard replies. "We sat through the whole list of credits. We couldn't move."

"Hmm," Tom smiles politely. "How about you, Samir? Did you and your wife see it?" he asks.

"No. We were at a wedding this weekend, a big family affair. Lots of good food and laughter."

"Edward's and my wedding, Samir, was catered by an India restaurant. The food was wonderful," Richard says.

"I want to know what you think makes a movie a 'chick flick', Tom," Cheryl asks. "Guys have got this crazy notion that women don't like anything but tear-jerking romances. I love blood and gore."

"Oh, not me. My wife and I never watch such movies. They are much too violent," Samir says.

"I like chick flicks," Richard says.

"Well, hello?!?!" Cheryl replies.

Laughing and raising his eyebrows, Tom says, "On that note, I'm off to work."

"Me, too," echoes Samir.

"Before you take off, Cheryl, I want to ask you something," Richard says. "Do you ever notice that no matter how hard I try to bring Edward into the conversation, it goes nowhere?"

"Well, what are you looking for?" Cheryl replies.

"Just an acknowledgment that I said it," Richard says. "Maybe an acknowledgment that I'm gay and that I have a partner."

"People know you're married to a guy," Cheryl replies. "How can they not? You've got his picture on your computer; you bring his name up all the time. What are you not getting that I can't see?"

"I don't expect you to see it," he says in frustration.

"What does that mean? Because I'm single? Because I'm a woman?"

"Because you're straight."

"Who says?" Cheryl asked.

"You mean to say that you're a dyke? How come you never share that with anyone?"

"Because it's no one's business, that's why. And maybe because I actually do see how people respond to you and I don't want to become invisible. People know you're gay. They just don't want to talk about it. You keep bringing it up and they keep stepping away from it. Take a hint. Don't bring it up."

"Why shouldn't I? Tom does. Samir does. Everybody but you does. I'll tell you, Monday mornings and Friday nights are my least favorite times in the office."

"Because?"

"Because that's when everyone talks about what they have in common with each other, and I get the clear picture that they don't want to know what I have in common with them," Richard answers. "They're hostile."

"They're not *hostile*," Cheryl replies. "They're *afraid*."

"Of me?"

"Of what they don't understand."

Issues

Are Richard's expectations unrealistic?

Do Tom, Samir, and his other coworkers have any responsibility to bring him into their social conversations?

Is Richard happy at work? Is Cheryl? Would we be surprised if they left the firm in search of a more welcoming environment?