

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

What's a Perfect Ally?

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An AT&T office in Dallas recently denied a gay employee 12 weeks of leave to attend to an ailing spouse, despite a policy that allows heterosexuals to do the same. AT&T gets a 100% rating from the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) on its Corporate Equality Index (CEI) and there are many people, including perhaps some at HRC, who questioned the legitimacy of AT&T's rating, given the fact that despite responding to the CEI survey that they did grant such leave to gay employees, they were claiming the law did not require them to do so.

AT&T has reversed itself and has granted the 12-year veteran leave to attend to the physical needs of his partner of 30 years who had suffered a debilitating stroke. Few of us will ever know what happened behind the scenes to prompt the Fortune 50 corporation to back off its initial decision, but all of us should recognize that what matters in this instance is the end result. Bryan Dickenson is on paid leave at the bedside of his beloved Bill Sugg.

My friend Daryl Herrschaft at HRC knows that I have always questioned the criteria for evaluating how gay- and transgender-friendly a company is. Far too few points are given for diversity training, and far too many companies are given credit for ineffective educational efforts. Not every company that has a perfect score from HRC deserves it, but I would argue that the AT&T of the 1980s did, given my experiences with the firm.

AT&T was a pioneer in providing diversity training on gay and transgender issues to its senior executives and workforce. Back in the late 1980s, they had me conducting eight-hour workshops to every shift in almost every factory. I stood in the executive board room, as did my colleague Heather Wishik, and guided the senior leadership to a point of unprecedented support long before gay issues were on any other corporate radar screen.

Since that time, through several breakups and mergers, many of the executives, attorneys, and factory workers she and I independently trained have retired, been let go, or have moved to other firms as the company has gone through this seismic reorganization. I don't know what AT&T is doing today to educate its employees so that they understand and embrace its commitment to valuing diversity. Perhaps it's time for the company to reboot.

There is no perfect ally. Even in the very best companies, some manager in some office, some salesperson, some teller, some flight attendant, some Human Resources person, or some attorney is going to screw up, say something stupid, and embroil the company in a controversy over discrimination. What matters most is what the company does with the screw up. When the Cracker Barrel restaurant chain fired 11 gay people overnight in 1991, no one would have called for a boycott if the fundamentalist Christian manager had been disciplined. Instead, the company issued a statement that supported his bigotry. They have since changed their tune, but it will be a long time before their product doesn't leave a bad taste in the mouths of gay consumers and our allies.

That's not what happened at AT&T. It's my guess that the change in direction in granting Bryan Dickenson family leave came as a result of phone calls of inquiry from HRC. Daryl and his able staff are experienced veterans of the campaign for equal rights for gay and transgender people in the workplace. They have connections in every major corporation. They know who to call to ask the right questions and to apply the right influence. Out & Equal is also a player with the power to lobby effectively behind the scenes. In this instance, I would put my money on the change coming from a senior executive in Human Resources getting the chief executive officer to step in and overrule the legal department.

It doesn't hurt to threaten with pickets and boycotts, as was beginning to happen in Dallas. No company today that seeks its share of the shrinking public pie wants to deal with negative publicity, but that alone will not prompt it to retreat from a position. Helping them do the right thing requires trust, and the assurance that the gay and transgender community knows they are our ally, but that the uninformed behavior of one or more of their employees is putting them at risk of losing their good reputation as a company committed to inclusiveness in the workplace.

AT&T did the right thing in reversing itself in Dallas. It is an imperfect ally, like all of our others, and as we are to them. Let's celebrate though the extraordinary progress we have made as a group in the global market in 25 years.