

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Wrong Charges Against Letterman

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There was a recent uproar over a skit on the *Late Show with David Letterman*, with most national gay and transgender organizations charging transphobia. Though the joke was about Amanda Simpson, a transsexual woman appointed by President Obama to a government post, the offense was rooted in homophobia, not transphobia. It isn't helpful to a nation just learning about transgender issues to confuse them with the inappropriate use of a word.

On the program in question, announcer Alan Kalter ran from the stage in horror when Letterman announced that Simpson was born male. The humor was supposed to come from Kalter realizing that he had been intimate with a woman without knowing that he had been with someone born male. His reaction of disgust was not to Simpson's sex reassignment surgery but to his horror that he had been involved with a man. That's homophobia—the fear and hatred of homosexuality in others or in ourselves. Transphobia is a fear and hatred of the transsexuality of others or of ourselves.

I recall with great annoyance the scene from the film *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* in which Jim Carrey is so disgusted from learning that a woman he kissed was actually a man that he brushed his teeth and gargled as if he had eaten feces. I was deeply offended that my kisses with Ray would be framed in such a way. Carrey's antics are a good example of homophobia, not transphobia, and we'll never know how much self-hate was generated by that scene. One wonders, though, what the national reaction would have been had Ace Ventura discovered he had kissed a woman who was black rather than white as he had supposed, and resorted to the same mouth cleansing. That behavior would be a good example of racism.

As Directors of Diversity and Inclusion, and members of corporate Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) work to educate senior managers and other colleagues about gay and transgender issues in the workplace, they need to be clear about how the two groups of valued employees are different from each other, and what challenges they share. If a company prohibits discrimination based upon a person's gender identity or expression, as will be required if Congress passes and the President signs the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), it is especially urgent that employees are clear on what behaviors are found disruptive to the workplace and why.

Most transgender people—both cross-dressers and transsexuals—are heterosexual in their sexual orientation, just as most left-handed people, tall people, blonds, Mormons, and other minority groups are heterosexual. The sex of others that attracts us romantically and erotically determines our sexual orientation (not "preference"). The gender that we call "home" determines our gender identity and our gender expression. If people hate us because they find it disgusting that two people of the same sex are physically intimate, that's homophobia. If people hate us because we have transitioned from one gender to the other, or because we express our gender in non-conforming ways, that's transphobia.

Every negative attitude against a person who happens to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual is not homophobia, just as every negative attitude toward a transgender person is not transphobia. Sometimes the gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender person, like their heterosexual and non-transgender colleagues, are simply irritating people, bad workers, slovenly, unprofessional, or otherwise difficult to be around.

Behaviors that make the workplace feel unsafe for the average gay person, or which create an atmosphere in which he or she feels undervalued because of their sexual orientation, is homophobia and a violation of most corporate policies and the laws of many states. Behaviors that do the same for the average cross-dresser or transsexual, whether covered yet by policy or law, impede a company's ability to effectively attract and retain the best and brightest employees, and to successfully market to all consumers.

David Letterman, his announcer, Alan Kalter, and his staff of comedy writers all need diversity training unless they wish to offend large segments of their viewing audience, and perhaps—if the unacceptable behavior is frequently repeated—their advertisers. Likewise, if the leaders of national gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender organizations want to be taken seriously as educators by the media and the general public, they need to be clearer and more accurate in why a word or a behavior is offensive.