

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

When We Assume We're Wanted

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As American lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender organizations think about expanding their services beyond U.S. borders, it's really important to spend time asking if our services are wanted. Sometimes, even when we think we're doing a good thing, other people don't want or appreciate our help.

For many years, as a favor to a dear friend who didn't cook but who entertained often, I'd walk in the door and, with the very best intentions, head straight to the kitchen. She and I would go through the ritual of me asking "What can I do?" but it was understood, I thought, that I should just plunge in and take over. I was good at something she wasn't good at. More recently, I learned that my taking over her kitchen each time wasn't appreciated. I was stunned and hurt, until I accepted the fact that what might have been helpful at one time isn't necessarily wanted forever. I take responsibility for not checking in to ask, "Is this really something you like me doing and want me to continue to do?"

When Ray and I were in Austria for Christmas, we met a gay man who is suing an American-based company for sexual orientation discrimination. For the last two years of his long employment by the company, he was asked by his U.S. bosses to market the firm to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community in Europe and Africa. Similar marketing had worked very well for the company in the United States, so the gay employee says he was told to duplicate the campaign. He felt he was successful, but a year ago on Christmas Eve he was fired. He surmises that there was far less support of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues by the company's European leaders, and that he had inadvertently stepped on toes in cultures that didn't appreciate the targeted marketing he was doing. As with my experience in my friend's kitchen, his company's good intentions apparently had unexpected and unwanted impact in some places.

It happens to all of us much of our lives. When we don't ask, we're stunned and hurt to discover that something we thought another person found helpful, pleasurable, fun, endearing, generous, and thoughtful, was experienced instead as irritating and unwanted. Life keeps reminding us that we need to ask. "Do you want me to do this for you?" "Is it helpful?" "Does it feel good?" The persons for whom the allegedly good deeds are being done also have a responsibility to speak up before their rebuff is so surprising and painful. Being fired without knowing why, when you thought you were doing what was wanted of you, can be a difficult life experience to get your head around. When marriages or friendships end, the cruel words that are spoken about behaviors of the other that were intolerable can be heartbreaking. "I had no idea," we mutter to ourselves for days, months, and years afterwards.

Out & Equal, our nation's most successful organization addressing equity for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in the workplace, is beginning to look beyond America's borders to do its good work. When I heard that it was hosting a conference in London in July of this year, I was delighted. I've done a lot of work with the banking executives in London over the past 20 years, and

I know that there is great interest in, and support of, our issues there. And, there are workplace efforts in play there by local and national lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender organizations. Knowing and trusting Out & Equal's executive leadership and staff, I believe that any conference they put together will be thoughtfully done. But sometimes, that's not the case. We always need to be sure to ask the right local people the right questions. "What can we do to support you?" "We think we can be helpful because we have had success in the United States, but we want you to tell us if what we are planning is what you want and need."

When I work with a group of people in planning a presentation, whether it's at the National Security Agency (NSA) in Maryland, or Bank of America Merrill Lynch (BAML) in Mumbai, I ask my hosts, "What will be a home run for you?" That allows them to decide for themselves their measures of success. Their answers aren't always the same. Sometimes they'll say, "Please help us better understand transgender issues." Other times a host might say, "We don't want you to spend much time on transgender issues." As important as I think it is to spend time on transgender issues, it's not my job to tell my host what it needs.

Perhaps if I had remembered that with my friend, and if the gay executive in Austria who was fired had done the same, we both might not be muttering to ourselves, "I had no idea."