

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

A Team of Heroes

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My shoes are off and I'm on my back on my hotel room sofa recharging my battery after a long, challenging day with nineteen employees, divided evenly between gay and straight, who have completed the first day of intense training to educate their colleagues on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender workplace issues. My guess is that these courageous volunteers are either still at the office or at home wearily making dinner for their families.

Many of these members of Merck's Employee Resource Group GLEAM (Gay and Lesbian Employees and Allies at Merck) spend 10 hours at work on an average day but have committed themselves to the enormous demands and personal challenges of a "Train the Trainer" session because they want to help make sure their workplace feels safe for everyone. In response to my pre-training questions, many of them told me that they were excited but afraid of not being good enough to be effective spokespersons for Merck's Office of Diversity and Inclusion. They didn't yet know how to answer the tough questions they anticipated getting when training the company's managers in offices and plants across the country.

Like their colleagues from Chubb, whose work had inspired them, all of the men and women at Merck had made great sacrifices to be with me for the two eight-hour days. Their company had just completed a major acquisition so their colleagues were all in overdrive. Being the best and brightest in their fields, their enormous workloads were piling up and would need to be addressed when we were finished with the sessions. Some of them had to negotiate with their union so as not to have to take vacation days to participate.

For two of the gay men, English was their second language, one being from Brazil, and the other from Malaysia. One straight black man was a deacon in his church, the head of a men's group and an officer in his union. He signed up to learn how to educate others on gay issues because his deeply beloved godfather was a gay man who died of AIDS. But not all of the heterosexuals who took on this herculean task of training did so because they had a close personal connection to someone who was gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. One woman, motivated by a sense of injustice, did it simply because she met another straight ally who impressed her with her commitment to the issue.

I met these men and women for the first time last night at dinner and by 5 o'clock tonight they had my heart and my greatest respect. I wish you could have been in the room with me today to watch them each face down their nervous fears of standing in front of others to tell their stories and to present a diversity curriculum they only recently had been able to review. Often in these situations, I experience myself with tear-filled eyes because I'm so deeply moved by the sights and sounds of people working so hard and so selflessly on an issue that has touched my life so dramatically, and on which for many years I and a handful of others felt we were doing battle nearly alone. We weren't, of course, but most of the walking wounded I know from the early days of the movement also remember the feelings of isolation and loneliness I encountered. At times, the task seemed overwhelming.

But today, there are armies of diversity soldiers who have assembled across the globe, at least half of

them straight allies, who are determined to make the world a safer place for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. Many do so at great sacrifice to themselves and to their families. So, when I work with these frontline warriors in corporations, in churches, and in communities, I try very hard to have them fully realize how incredibly impactful their work is to the lives of others who will never know how to thank them.

I tell you about my experiences this week at Merck and my awareness of similar programs being conducted elsewhere with the hope that it might comfort and inspire you, and that if you have the opportunity to do so, that you might thank these men and women when you meet them.

I'm so very proud of my new friends. My hat is off as well as my shoes.