

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Barack, Barney, Antonin, and Valuing Diversity

Posted: 26 Mar 2009 08:28 AM PDT

President Barack Obama is, I believe, our nation's Director of Diversity and Inclusion. Like his counterparts in the corporate world, he seems to firmly believe in creating an environment in which all citizens feel safe and valued. It's too bad that he doesn't have as much leeway as his corporate counterparts in disciplining citizens who create hostile working and living conditions for others. At the very least, he ought to be able to mandate their attendance at a diversity class in which they would understand the impact of their behavior on others and how it undermines the nation's values. (I think it would be great if Rush Limbaugh was required to attend such a class. I'd love to have him in one of mine.)

If U.S. Congressman Barney Frank and Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia were employed by the same corporation, both of them would be required to take diversity training because of on the job behavior.

Barney, who like Oprah, is immediately recognized by many people by the use of just his first name, created a stir this week by suggesting that Justice Scalia is homophobic. Now, most people who have heard or read Justice Scalia's comments on homosexuality would probably agree. I feel that he's our Anita Bryant on the Supreme Court. Justice Scalia makes no excuses for his socially conservative Catholic views. He refuses to use the word gay without quote marks and he refers to same-sex intimacy as homosexual sodomy. When it comes to gay issues, he has, I feel, no ability to check his biases at the door of the workplace.

In a corporate setting, Justice Scalia wouldn't be allowed to make disparaging remarks about gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender people regardless of his rank or religious affiliation. He would, in fact, be asked to use the term gay rather than the more formal term homosexual. Corporate employees are protected from the culture wars by policies that underscore the value of diversity in the workforce. I suspect that Justice Scalia would feel quite isolated by his views. I've not met any corporate manager in the past ten years who was anywhere near as rigid in his socially conservative views as Justice Scalia. (I'd love to have him in one of my corporate presentations too. I think I might have an impact on his thinking.)

But, nor would my friend Congressman Frank, if employed in a corporation, be allowed to refer to Antonin Scalia in the workplace as a homophobe. Such labeling, though possibly true, is also in violation of corporate policy. It contributes to the creation of a hostile work environment in which no one can be expected to produce at their highest level. If Barney had an issue with Antonin, he would be encouraged to take it up with his manager and then with Human Resources. They in turn would have the obligation to approach Antonin to discuss the impact of his behavior on his colleagues. If he persisted, they would explain, he could be discharged.

Having worked in the Church, in the media, in government, and in corporate settings, I feel that if every employee in every workplace was guided by the principle of valuing diversity that has

been incorporated by nearly every major company in the western world, the earth would be a much more civil and safe place to exist.

Can we imagine what life in the United States might be like if every radio talk show host was required to speak in a respectful way of all groups of people? What if they were told that any words from him that created a hostile environment for others would result in the termination of employment?

What if respect for diversity was the guideline in every major religious denomination, in every election campaign, in all immigration debates, and in all matters of governance?

What if everyone in the Armed Forces, regardless of rank, was required to be respectful of everyone else's difference? If they were employees of a U.S. corporation, they would be. So would police officers, prison guards, and border patrols.

Today, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people have a much better chance of being treated with respect and feeling safe in the corporate workplace than they do anywhere else in their lives. It's easier for me to advise a gay person where to work than it is where to worship. It's likelier that they will find justice in the Human Resource Office of their workplace than in the legislative or judicial branches of their government.

Perhaps that will change. Perhaps our new President and the First Lady will inspire a new tone in our dealings with one another. They and everyone else, I feel, could profit greatly by being familiar with the extraordinary model of valuing diversity that now directs all corporate business.