

# Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

---

## The Unnecessary Revolving Closet Door

Posted: 2 March 2011, 1:42PM

Being gay is hip with straight 30-somethings. Genderqueer is in. Provincetown is cool. Ft. Lauderdale is hot.

Anne Hathaway and James Franco made sure that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people were well represented at the Oscars. In their opening monologue, the 29-year-old actress talked about the big presence of lesbians, with the films *The Kids are Alright* and *Black Swan* in contention for awards. Later, when Hathaway was cross-dressed in a tuxedo, the 32-year-old Franco appeared in Marilyn Monroe drag. Billions of people in the world saw him in a blond wig smiling.

Our 33-year-old, straight, Wall Street nephew sends us regular e-mails regarding gay and transgender issues. His wife is trying to get me into her firm to do diversity training with executives on gay and transgender issues. They both love spending the 4th of July in Provincetown with us.

Some straight 30-somethings are hipper with being gay than some gay 30-somethings are. In the latest issue of *Out* magazine, the editor explained they couldn't get one young, out gay actor to agree to be featured in their Hollywood-themed edition. Instead, a straight actor who plays a gay character on *Glee* got the front cover. Aaron Hicklin, the editor, explained with frustration, "It's the dirty secret of Hollywood that even gay actors have to measure their appearances in gay media, because gay is tough enough. But too gay is deadly." Are we sure of that?

Some transgender people will cross-dress on the street in Provincetown, but not further up Cape Cod in Hyannis. Some gay people hold hands in Wilton Manor, Florida, but not further south in Key Largo. Some gay and transgender people organize the gay employee group at their company's headquarters, and retreat to the closet when they are transferred to another site. But when we don't cross-dress as transgender people in Hyannis, don't hold hands as gay and lesbian people in Key Largo, and don't come out at work as gay or transgender, it's not because the people around us aren't hip to us. It's because we wrongly assume that they will be uncomfortable. One of those young, gay actors should have accepted the offer to appear on the cover of *Out*. Nothing but good things would have happened.

A friend of mine found this out the hard way. He was the very visible and outspoken guy who led his gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Employee Resource Group in his company's headquarters, and then went back into the closet when he transferred to another site. After a while, my friend so hated the stench of his workplace closet that he nervously wrote a message to his three "very male" colleagues, and the site's big boss.

"I wrote this e-mail," he explained to me, "because everyone wanted to hook me up with all the single girls in the plant. It was getting old quick! I just had to be honest and authentic since I did not like the person that I was seeing in the mirror on the closet door (very dark in there!)"

His e-mail to his colleagues and boss read:

"So I have not been very honest about who I really am. For the last three years, I have been the global president of our company's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Employee Resource Group.

It took me 40 years to decide it was time to tell the people that I love and work with that I was gay, and then a couple of months ago, I gave that all up to make a career change and move here. At that time, the closet door slammed shut, and I was back in that very dark space all over again, and have not been the same ever since.

Being in the closet and making up stories of what I did this weekend, or lying about my partner of nine years is extremely tiring. You forget what you have told people, and it takes so much out of a person not being authentic. When you do this, you are not bringing 100% of your true self to work every day, and when this happens everyone suffers.

Nothing really has to change. You don't have to worry about saying something wrong, or asking me questions, or talking about my partner and our family. I don't expect you to understand or 'accept' my being gay. It is simply who I am."

One colleague wrote back:

"Thank you for sharing this information. I know that it must have been difficult for you. It makes me sad to think that you felt the need to hide this aspect of your life, but I realize that there are many narrow-minded, intolerant people out there. I am looking forward to working closely with you, and I will do whatever I can to help you. Please do not hesitate to ask for help if you need it, at work or at home."

The big boss replied:

"I am not sure what prompted you to send the e-mail to these three colleagues, but I do appreciate your willingness to be open about your situation. This is a very hard and courageous thing to do. I also believe it is the right thing to do for your own conscience, and to be transparent with co-workers so you can feel comfortable in the work environment. I support this type of openness and will not tolerate anyone making others feel threatened or uncomfortable in our workplace. I hope this was not the case, and please do not hesitate to speak with me.

Honestly, I have been impressed with what you have brought to the site, and feel you will be a catalyst to help change the culture we need for us to be successful. Please don't let us be stagnant in the traditional ways we have thought and worked. It is the 'outside' influence and ideas that will help us engage positive change and improvements. Thanks again for sharing your e-mail and having the courage and candor to face the situation head on. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to help."

My friend said to me in response, "I wish I could package the feeling of acceptance, and be able to give it to others so they know that it is possible to be yourself every day."

We create our own dramas. That is not to say that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people should not be cautious. It just means that the world is changing faster than our own attitudes and behaviors.