

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

D – My Name is Diversity

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When I was a youngster living in Flint, Michigan, I was very good at jump rope. I was also good at hopscotch, and jacks, but that's another story. When we played jump rope, my girl friends and I would keep rhythm for ourselves by singing through the alphabet. I would sing, "A - My name is Alan and my wife's name is Alice. We come from Alabama with a carload of apples. B - My name is Brian and my wife's name is Betty. We come from Buffalo with a carload of bananas. C - My name...." You get the picture.

Our little group of children didn't learn much about each other through the words of that song, other than that we could be creative coming up with appropriate words, especially when we reached the Q and the X.

In many workplaces today, the adults don't know much more about each other than the contents of the song. "Hi, my name is Alex and my wife's name is Charlene. We moved here from Des Moines with a carload of children." According to an important new study, published in the American Psychological Association's Journal of Applied Psychology, limiting what we tell about ourselves and what we know about each other at work is not good for the company in its efforts to be optimally productive by valuing diversity. To achieve a competitive edge, a company needs to create an environment in which all employees feel safe, encouraged, and *rewarded* for sharing relevant information about themselves. For instance, I might say, "Hi, my name is Brian and my husband's name is Ray. I'm 61 and he's 58. We moved here from Boston where we met in 1976. I'm certified as a sexuality educator and have made my living by educating others on gay and transgender issues. Ray's career was in finance, having worked for many years at Lehman Brothers. We were both raised and educated as Catholics, but our spirituality is nurtured by other influences today. I'm glad to be here and I look forward to learning more about each of you."

If each person in the group was enabled to do the same, our work team would be far more effective than one in which people knew little of each other's backgrounds. But that is easier said than done. According to Leslie DeChurch, an organizational psychologist at the University of Central Florida, and her co-author, Jessica Mesmer-Magnus of the University of North Carolina, employees from diverse backgrounds are less likely than employees from similar backgrounds to share information with each other, which makes creating the best decisions in meetings more difficult. As most corporations concur, there is a strong business case to be made for valuing diversity. Creating a safe and productive work environment in which every employee feels safe and valued increases the company's chances of attracting and retaining the best and brightest employees, and in successfully marketing to all segments of the community. In such corporations, employees with diverse professional and personal backgrounds should stand to gain the most at work by sharing personal information. Instead, according to the study, they typically search for and discuss what they have in common instead of sharing information not known by the rest of the group.

"The conventional wisdom is that diverse teams have an advantage over homogenous ones, but these findings show diverse teams are even less likely to talk about the differences that are at the root of their advantage," DeChurch said. "Diversity can only be an asset when unique perspectives are openly shared with the team."

The challenge for corporations seeking to encourage personal sharing by its increasingly diverse workforce is how to create an environment in which doing so is not only safe but seen by everyone as a positive contribution to the business imperative. Starting at the top would be a good first step. If members of the Executive Committee, with guidance from diversity and human resources professionals, spent time speaking to each other of their own unique backgrounds, and carefully and gratefully listened to their peers do the same, the effectiveness of the Executive Committee would be greatly enhanced. The next step would be for all senior managers to follow suit. If senior managers were taught to share with each other the unique perspectives they bring to the workplace, they could then enable their direct reports to confidently do likewise. If steps such as these are not taken, it's highly unlikely that the diversity of the workforce will ever be truly valued or put to good use.

Corporations need to focus attention on how to help their employees say more than, "D - My name is Donald and my wife's name is Daisy. We come from Detroit with a car load of ducks." Saying just that is a useless and really easy thing to do, unless, of course, you're singing it as a teenage boy skipping rope in front of a group of other teenage boys. That would be very brave.