

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Flowers & Dinner for Coming Out at Work

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Attending a large conference can initially exacerbate one's inherent sense of isolation and loneliness, even one the focus of which is your wellbeing. The first day that I spent at the Out and Equal Conference in Orlando last week was like that for me, despite my many years working in the field of workplace equality for gay and transgender people.

But like our experiences at a new school, when we connect with friends, old and new, the awkward feeling of being unknown disappears, as it did for me when I started running into familiar faces and hanging out with my buddies Bob Witeck, Wes Combs, and Todd Sears.

Todd (of Credit Suisse) and Bob (of Witeck-Combs) were part of a workshop I led on "ENDA Doesn't End It", a review of what work yet needs to be done when the Employment Non-Discrimination Act passes Congress. Also on the panel that worked with the large audience were friends Louise Young (Raytheon), Daryl Herrschaft (Human Rights Campaign), and Steve Sears (Nova, and Out and Equal).

I posed five questions, each of which will be addressed here in the next few weeks. The first is: "What specifically needs to be done at your organization in the next five years to create an environment in which coming out is seen as a positive career move by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees and their managers?"

After the 100 participants struggled for 15 minutes in five small groups on whether being gay or transgender should ever be criteria for measuring promotability, I further explained the meaning of the question. When the daughter of my friend Michael Carrera had her first period, I told them, Michael and his wife bought her flowers and took her out for a celebratory dinner. They wanted their daughter to experience her initial menstruation not as a "curse" as so many other young women were taught to see it, but rather as an exciting ritual of initiation into womanhood. The manifestation of the new, age-related ability to conceive a child was a powerful teachable moment about the wondrous workings of the body and the responsibilities of mature decision-making that must now be embraced.

So, instead of coming out as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender in the workplace being viewed as a courageous act of personal survival, how can we reframe it to be experienced as an important sign of commitment to the values of the corporation, and a good indication of excellent leadership skills? I wasn't looking for the suggestion of flowers from the CEO and a candle-lit dinner with the head of Human Resources, but rather something that would publicly acknowledge the appreciation of the company and prevent the feelings of isolation and loneliness that can come from feeling alone and vulnerable, like being friendless at a conference or a new student in school.

One corporation, with which I have worked, for instance, during Gay Awareness month, placed large photos outside of the company's cafeteria that featured individual members of the organization's gay and transgender Employee Resource Group with their respective managers and other representatives of senior leadership. The biographical data below the pictures named the employees, their family members who were also often included, and their managers. The clear message sent by the smiling faces is that the company happily and thankfully affirmed its openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender teammates.

Suggestions made by the group—once we made clear that it was not one's sexual orientation or gender identity that was being rewarded but rather the willingness to share one's identity—included assigning an executive mentor to each out employee, mentoring and support from the ERG, and positive public (when approved) reference to the individuals and the lessons learned from them by executive officers.

No one wants to be known as the gay employee or the transsexual manager, but rather as the employee who happens to be gay and the manager who happens to be transsexual. Having openly gay and transgender employees and managers will help a company attract and retain talent, increase productivity, and maximize profitability, but getting the large number of closeted employees to come out will require that management actively create an environment in which choosing to do so is experienced as a valued expression of commitment to corporate values as opposed to a "curse" that must be endured.