

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Why We Won't Come Out

Posted: 1 Oct 2009 3:00 AM PDT

The reason that there are so many gay and transgender people in the closet in firms that receive perfect scores for their diversity initiatives is that they know their issues are not taken as seriously as those of women and people of color.

In a recent meeting with Human Resource professionals, they agreed with my description of typical behavior on their bank's trading floor. Like most every firm's equities department, the trading floor (like many factory floors in manufacturing) is generally seen as the "boy's club" where expressions of disdain can fill the highly charged atmosphere. "Hey, homo" and "That's so gay" would be commonplace infractions of their "zero tolerance" non-discrimination policies. The Human Resource personnel also agreed with me that similar taunts that involved negative words about a person's race or gender would be treated more seriously.

When I asked if there were any openly gay people on a floor of 200 people, they said no. Surprise, surprise.

One day, perhaps in the not too distant future, the trading floors of all financial institutions will feel safe enough for an employee to be openly gay. For that to happen, though, managers need to be educated about what constitutes a hostile work environment for gay and transgender people. The firm's highest-producing employees need to be brought on board as allies, and clients who are openly disrespectful of gay and transgender people need to understand the firm is willing to lose their business if they can't bring themselves to speak respectfully.

Most managers understand the business case for valuing diversity but they are unconsciously incompetent about what behaviors constitute a violation of policy. They want a cohesive, productive team of happy, energized people, and humor is seen as a good means of lightening up the mood. Most managers don't want to be put in the position of being the PC (political correctness) cop, but without their sensitivity to the impact of unsupportive comments on the feelings of gay people and their family members and friends — and unless they are willing to risk unpopularity by speaking up — the current unwelcoming environment can't change. Gay people won't come out, they won't recommend the firm to others as a good place to work, and they will look for a way out, if not a way to secure legal redress.

Securing the help of heterosexual allies on the floor — particularly those with influence because of their stature as big producers or because of their likeability — helps a great deal in changing the culture to be more respectful and welcoming. Human Resource professionals generally do not have as much influence on the hearts, minds, and behavior of offending employees as would a respected peer who said, "Hey, knock it off. That's not funny."

Profit being the primary motivation in most corporations, nothing sends a clearer message about the firm's commitment to valuing diversity than letting go of a financially valuable client or employee should they be unable to actively accept the company's rules on respectful behavior — a short term loss for a long term gain.

Finally, Human Resource professionals are on the front line of ensuring that the workplace feels welcoming for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. In order for them to succeed, they need two things. They need to receive a good education on gay and transgender issues so that they have the confidence and competence to understand the problem and to remedy it. They also need the cooperation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees, young and old, in pursuing remedies. Too often, employees tie the hands of HR by complaining but then saying "but I don't want you to do anything about it".

Openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees are the most effective means of positively transforming the workplace environment, but to put the all-important face on the issue they need to trust that coming out is viewed by their managers and colleagues as good for the company, and that their issues will be taken as seriously as those of women and of racial minorities.