Enabling Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Employees to Feel Safe & Valued

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A few years ago, my spouse Ray was a managing director of global equity sales for Lehman Brothers. To the surprise and great regret of his firm, he took an early retirement because he felt tolerated there as a gay person, not accepted. As one of the first gay people out of the closet on Wall Street, he felt alone in coping with the silence he experienced when he brought up my name with fellow employees, and with the lack of questions he received from them about our weekend or holiday plans. His colleagues were not hostile to him. But their ignorance-based anxiety about homosexuality made it hard for them to engage Ray socially. Some may have feared using the wrong words. Others may have worried about wandering into a discussion for which they were ill prepared. The result of their anxiety was emotional exhaustion for Ray, and with his departure, a major financial loss for the company. Not only did Lehman forfeit the talent, years of experience, and good relationships with clients that Ray represented, but they also lost the most effective tool they had in marketing to the gay community.

Not long ago, I was approached by the Chief Financial Officer of an organization for which I was providing diversity training on gay and transgender issues. She asked me after an executive session for help in talking with a closeted gay man on her staff. "I sense he wants to come out to me, but I don't know how to have the conversation with him about being gay." After learning that her objective was to make it easier for her colleague to fully participate in corporate life, and that it was acceptable to her if he chose not to come out after her overture, I proposed to the CFO a way to make it a comfortable conversation for them both. "Go out for coffee," I suggested, "and, in your own words, say something to the effect of, 'You and I have worked together for many years, and you know how very fond of you I am. I feel as if I've shared everything there is to know about me, but I have the nagging feeling that perhaps I'm not making it easy for you to share as openly with me'." The next time I saw her, the CFO pulled me aside to thank me for the coaching. "It worked perfectly," she reported. "He came out to me, and we're both so happy that he did."

Thousands of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people are out of the closet in the corporate world today, including senior executives in Disney, AT&T, American Airlines, Microsoft, McDonalds, Goldman Sachs, Clorox, and IBM, only to name a few, but the majority of us are still hidden despite promises by our companies that nothing bad will happen to us if we come out. Toward the end of the twenty sessions I did for the 800 senior managers at a major banking firm, having heard them all describe the company's working environment as "very welcoming" for gay people, I asked them why it was then that only two people out of the 800 had yet to identify themselves as gay in an affirming four-hour program on gay and transgender issues. "If it's so safe, where are they?" I asked. They decided maybe it wasn't as welcoming as they had assumed.

Gay and transgender people who are out of the closet today often report feeling invisible, just like Ray. They either become the person to whom every heterosexual turns for information on the gay

community, or, more likely, they are marginalized. Closeted gay people see how their openly gay colleagues have become identified more as "gay" than as "team players," and they decide to continue to expend the extraordinary energy it takes to hide who they are. This problem can be solved.

A successful global diversity initiative on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender workplace issues must include educating heterosexual managers and colleagues on sexual orientation and on gender identity and expression. It must also provide them with helpful guidance so that they don't unconsciously offend others by assuming their sexual orientation, or by using inappropriate language. They need to know that asking a closeted gay man if he has a girlfriend, assuming that a heterosexually-unmarried woman is necessarily single, and referring to homosexuality as an "alternative lifestyle," a "preference," a "choice," or as something that is "admitted" or "confessed," creates for gay people an unwelcoming environment in which they can't come out, and from which they'd like to depart. This is true for gay employees and gay customers alike.

It's the small but significant things today that create unwelcoming workplaces for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees in the workplace. Most people probably assume that gay people fear that their boss or colleague will quote "damning" religious texts or use blatantly homophobic words such as "fag." That doesn't happen very often in Fortune 500 companies, at least not in those with which I have worked. The reason that most gay and transgender people fear coming out is that despite their company having all of the right policies, and a 100% rating on the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index, the "music" of their work area creates warnings of caution.

When I say the "music," I'm referring to the verbal and non-verbal cues gay and transgender employees get from their managers and colleagues that tell them there is a lack of awareness, a discomfort, and a hope that the issue will never come up. Silence on the issue is deafening. The lack of people being out on the job is clear evidence of a problem. Watching an openly gay person be left out of social conversations on Monday mornings is proof of their "untouchable" status.

At least in North America, Europe, and Australia, there is an assumption that corporations understand and affirm the need to create a welcoming environment for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees in order to compete for talent and full market share. (This awareness is growing in Asia and in Latin America.) Regrettably, many heterosexuals in major urban areas such as New York, Toronto, London, and Sydney mistakenly assume that being gay in the workplace is not an issue there because of the popular cultural support gay people experience locally. This false belief prompts professionals in the offices of Diversity and Inclusion, and of Human Resources, to assume that there are no problems. Policies are in place, they say. Senior executives are supportive of diversity initiatives. A table of tickets was bought by the company at a local gay benefit dinner. But their uninformed colleagues are nevertheless still stepping on the toes of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people regularly, creating fear and frustration, particularly among young, gay employees who were recruited from college with the promise that the workplace was "gay affirming," and among young gay consumers who see ads touting the company's gay-positive policies.

The most helpful advice that can be provided to heterosexual managers and colleagues throughout the world is not to assume other people are heterosexual. Always allow for the probability that a gay

person is present. The second most helpful advice to provide them is on what words and expressions are experienced by gay and transgender people as welcoming, and what words and expressions are experienced as fingernails scratching on a chalkboard. They need also to be aware how their everyday behaviors communicate clearly their comfort level on the issues. Refraining from asking a gay person about his or her weekend, or about the picture of their partner on the desk, tells the gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender employee to be prepared to lose status and visibility if they come out. Managers, especially, should be encouraged to proactively engage with gay people, particularly when they sense discomfort among their heterosexual employees. Welcoming "music" includes mentoring, saying the words "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual," and "transgender," and not just the acronym "LGBT," insisting upon diversity training for the team, sitting with a gay person at lunch, sharing stories with others about gay family members, using inclusive language about marriage and families, making eye contact, smiling, attending events sponsored by the company's gay employee resource group, and speaking up when a demeaning comment or word is used, among other actions.

In all areas of diversity, corporations are now in the place where next steps are required. Supportive policies have been secured. To make every person in the workplace feel safe and valued though, every other person in the workplace needs to be taught how to make those with whom they feel the most anxiety feel like full and equal members of the team. The only way to do that is through diversity training.

What a big difference it would have made in our lives if one of Ray's colleagues had been enabled to get past his or her fear of the unknown successfully enough to ask the questions, "How is Brian?" and, "What are you guys doing for the holidays?"