

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Old Enemies, New Friends

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So, guess who I heard from regarding their diversity initiatives on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues? Here's a clue: In 1991 the firm announced a new employment policy that barred people "whose sexual preferences fail to demonstrate normal heterosexual values, which have been the foundation of families in our society". At least 11 gay men and lesbians were immediately fired. The policy was rescinded in response to public protest, but the employees were never re-hired. If you guessed Cracker Barrel, you're right!

The Cracker Barrel Old Country Store, Inc., whose roadside restaurants we had for many years urged family members and friends to boycott, is now exploring how best to educate its employees on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues. That value of fairness is the foundation of our society. Good for Cracker Barrel. It still only has a score of 15 out of 100 on the Human Rights Campaign's [Corporate Equality Index](#), so it has a long, long way to go in its efforts to create a safe and productive work environment for everyone, but at least someone there inquired about how best to educate others, and that's an important step forward.

I, for one, welcome old enemies as new friends. Take American Airlines and Coors Brewing Co., for instance. We were asking friends to boycott both of those corporations at one time, too. A flight attendant on American recommended the destruction of all of the blankets and pillows from a flight out of D.C. right after the 1993 March on Washington. Coors at one time forced all employees to take a lie detector test that included a disqualifying question about sexual orientation. Now both firms have 100% rating on the Corporate Equality Index and are seen by members of the gay community as champions of workplace equity.

We've come a long, long way since a colleague of mine at the Catholic newspaper that fired me in 1974 for being gay opened the front door of our offices and yelled out to a group of gay people picketing on my behalf, "Hey, which one of you fairies owes me a quarter for my tooth?"

Though the Catholic Church is not represented, over 100 major global corporations are making their presence felt this week in Orlando, Florida at the annual [Out and Equal](#) conference on the issues facing gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees. Thousands of men and women representing the full spectrum of diversity and all levels of management have gathered to explore how to enhance their efforts at creating a safe and productive work environment that attracts and retains the best and brightest employees, and to market effectively to the gay and transgender buying public.

Firms such as Ernst & Young, GMAC, Deloitte, Proctor & Gamble, Hewlett-Packard, SC Johnson, Microsoft, Kodak, Boeing, PepsiCo, and Best Buy (only to name a few) have spent thousands of dollars to set up displays in the exhibit area to communicate clearly that they want to hire and sell to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. They and other firms have bought tables at the

awards dinner and have underwritten the cost of sending their directors and staffs of Diversity and Inclusion, and of Human Resources, to participate in the educational event.

We've come a long way since firms like Cracker Barrel would dare make homophobic public statements, though firms such as Exxon Mobil still refuse to protect gay and transgender people from employment discrimination. Many of us expect that before long, federal legislation entitled the [Employment Non-Discrimination Act](#) (ENDA) will force Exxon Mobil to prohibit such discrimination. Until then, though, we continue working on our own to educate old enemies and to strengthen the confidence and competence of new friends.

At the two-and-a-half-hour workshop that I'm conducting this week, we will, for instance, be addressing together the five following questions:

1. 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?
2. What specific, unique value do gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people bring to the table in an organization? Cite examples of actual leveraging by an organization of its gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees.
3. ENDA will protect against workplace discrimination based on gender identity, which the legislation defines as including gender expression (cross dressing and mannerisms). What specific steps should organizations be taking to ensure awareness of all transgender issues and to properly address the unique needs of its transgender employees?
4. What specific steps must be taken to ensure that an organization's commitment to valuing diversity transcends regional and cultural attitudes toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people?
5. Given the eventual passage of ENDA, what should the benchmarks be for measuring an organization's progress in creating a workplace in which the presence and contributions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people will be fully valued?

I'll report back next week on how we answered these questions. Until then, it's okay to have a pot roast dinner at the Cracker Barrel, but please avoid getting gas at an Exxon Mobil station if you can—at least until they become a friend.