

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Captain Bible and Your Safety

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You're on a plane heading home after a tiring business trip. You've buckled your seat belt in 9C as directed, turned off all of your electronic equipment, and stored your belongings beneath your seat. You smiled at the flight attendant as you listened to the safety instructions you've heard dozens of times before. You've even glanced at the safety instruction card in the seat pocket. What more can you do?

Unbeknownst to you, up on the flight deck, the pilot is heavily distracted as he goes through his safety check. He has just asked his female co-pilot if she's married and she has replied, "Yes, her name is Sharon." He assumes that the male flight attendants are homosexuals but he doesn't have to have any contact with them. They can't stay for long in his sacred workspace. But the person sitting close to him for the next three hours is a lesbian. He looks at her and asks, "Have you found Jesus?" This makes the co-pilot feel very unsafe and unwanted. She knew that it was always a possibility, but she hoped she wouldn't ever have to fly with a vocal fundamentalist Christian.

"I call him Captain Bible," she told the 150 gay pilots who were swapping war stories during their annual meeting. "I called Sharon that night and asked her to give me some Bible quotes to throw back at him. I was stuck with him for my next two trips."

Do you want the pilot of the plane that is flying you home to your family to be distracted by anxious feelings about homosexuality, and by a determination to get the co-pilot to repent a "sinful lifestyle"?

A male member of the National Gay Pilots Association (NGPA) offered, "The captain on one of my flights said to me, 'Do you see all the male flight attendants huddled in the back together? They're all fags. I wish they'd die of AIDS.' I said to him, 'You do know that I'm gay, right?' He said, 'Oh, God, I hope what I said didn't offend you.' I'm serious."

Most commercial airlines have policies that prohibit discrimination against gay and transgender people, but not all of them. Regrettably, even for those that do, pilots are rarely required to attend a diversity training that includes helpful information on gay or transgender issues. The majority of the commuter airline companies don't address harassment of colleagues because of sexual orientation, so the flight deck can be a battleground. The NGPA wants to change that, but it can only do so if Human Resource Directors acknowledge that public safety is impacted when no one is adequately trained and no one monitors discrimination in the workplace, especially in base domiciles and on the flight deck. Public awareness and response is key to the success of the group in ending harassment, as is the willingness of gay, lesbian, and transgender people in aviation, to come out and put a face on the issue.

In the morning session of the group that I attended in preparation for my keynote speech to them that evening, I was astounded by the number of pilots who were out on the job, the open pride of the aviation students in the group, the number of airlines represented in the discussion, and the significant accomplishments of the pilots, many of whom were former military personnel. I was also very impressed with the wisdom and good humor of the group, which laughed at the horror stories, and by how the pilots had dealt with the incidents. One after the other, including the co-pilot who flew with “Captain Bible,” related how they had spoken up when confronted with bigotry. But not everyone feels they can.

My talk at dinner that night was supposed to address how to respond when they experienced ignorant behavior in the workplace, but I chose to speak instead on why we all need to claim our space and make it safe. There are many ways to deal with anti-gay remarks, such as saying, “I’m gay and don’t appreciate your humor,” or by simply saying “People I care about are gay and your words are making me uncomfortable.” One man asked me at the dinner table how to come out to his colleagues, and I suggested that he just start including his spouse’s name in conversations, such as “Bob and I saw that movie, too.” We all have our own ways of dealing with problems, and it’s important that we do what feels right and comfortable rather than try to copy someone else’s technique. The important thing is to challenge those who belittle you. The strength to do so comes from knowing why you must speak up.

After making that point in the introduction to my dinner address, I reminded them of the words of Henry David Thoreau, the wealthy resident of Concord, Massachusetts, who left his home of comfort and lived in the nearby woods next to Walden Pond. “I went to the woods,” he said, “because I wished to live deliberately. To front the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

Living deliberately and fronting the essential facts of life requires that gay people come out of the closet. If they don’t, they will die and feel they had never lived. The NGPA is a resource for gay and lesbian people in aviation to do so with the comforting support of others. They need to create honest and welcoming space for themselves in the world, not just for their own safety, but for ours too. And they need to know that as they battle “Captain Bible” on the flight deck, we’re back in seat 9C, counting on them to be strong, and wanting to support them in any way we can.