

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Getting to Know a Transgender Person

Posted: 24 Sept 2009 6:00 AM PDT

In response to a corporate diversity presentation I gave awhile back, a transsexual employee got very upset that I suggested to the audience that our awareness of gender identity issues was probably about 10 years behind our awareness of issues of sexual orientation. She felt I was diminishing the importance of transgender concerns with her peers. While I understood her heightened sensitivity, the reality is that while most Americans say they know someone who is gay or lesbian; most Americans don't know someone who is transgender. In fact, most Americans—even those in corporations that have policies protecting transgender people from discrimination—don't even know what the word "transgender" actually means. Inclusion of the words "gender identity" in the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) won't change that quickly. Only one-on-one personal contact will "normalize" transsexuality and cross-dressing in people's minds, as contact with the far greater population of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals has done with different sexual orientations.

But, every day, we are making progress on this issue, because every day a transgender woman or man steps forward and helps puts a face on the issue. Each time they courageously do so, they provide those around them the opportunity to be educated. Take for instance a particular check-out person at a discount department store.

A friend recently wrote:

"I was checking out of the Target store today, and the appearance of the clerk drew my attention. Her name was Marlene (according to her nametag), perhaps in her late 30s/early 40s, and she seemed extremely uncomfortable in her own body – seemed drawn into herself, eyes down, hunched inward. Just based on my observation, she appeared to either be genetically female with significant male characteristics (squarish facial structure, hairiness on face/arms, etc.) or a genetic male going through the transgender process – she seemed to be wearing a wig (not sure), seemed to be developing breasts (could be false), but hadn't gotten rid of some very significant male traits yet.

It made me stop to think how extraordinarily difficult it must be for people to go thru the transgender process (please correct my terminology – not sure I'm using the terms correctly) and to feel that uncomfortable either in the body you were born with or haven't yet transitioned to the body and gender identity you want. I felt bad for her – suspecting that she probably feels really out of place in society, not trusting other people's view of her or how they might treat her because she's 'different' (for whatever reason).

To my knowledge, I only know of one other person who has gone/is going thru the transgender process, but haven't been around her since she started last year – so I don't know how she's doing or if she has had major struggles with the transition. Definitely makes me wonder now.

Anyway, I thought of you during this encounter. Thanks for helping make me more aware thru your writings. In the past, I would have just tried to ignore the whole situation and put it out of my mind – instead of wondering and considering."

I replied, "Good for you – A+++ for thoughtfulness, perception, and understanding. Isn't it wonderful to have access to life's full menu?"

I don't know what my friend did at the time, but had I been in the store—especially if Ray-the-impatient-shopper wasn't with me—I would have made a point to stand in Marlene's check-out line. When it was my turn to be rung-up, I would make eye contact, give her a big smile, and say "Hi, Marlene. I love your...(whatever I felt she might be taking pride in, such as a bracelet or earrings.)" I'd leave her with a "Thank you, ma'am. See you next time, Marlene."

Marlene would know that I was going out of my way to affirm her. It isn't a subtle approach, but it's better than "I know you're a transsexual and I'm proud of you." If I eventually got to know her as a friend, I would probably feel comfortable saying, "Hey, strut your stuff, babycakes. Your body language suggests to me something other than self-confidence." But that would come much, much later. First, I would need to acknowledge the dignity of the person who is different from me, communicate my acceptance and respect, and enable them to trust my good intentions. That can happen only when they give me the chance to acknowledge their presence.

That's why it's going to take awhile for public awareness of, and comfort with, transgender people to catch up to the current level of positive attitudes and behaviors toward gay men and lesbian women. But it will happen in due time because of people like the check-out person at Target and the friend who stopped to reflect on her encounter with someone who was differently normal.