Why Companies Support Gay Relationships
Posted: 28 Sep 2010 4:51 PM PDT

In 1990, when Lehman Brothers asked my spouse, Ray Struble, to take over their Atlanta office, he told the firm they would need to pay my relocation expenses. There was no policy that covered such a benefit at his firm, or any other at the time, but Lehman said, "Yes." It later became official policy at his firm, and at most others.

In the upcoming Out and Equal Workplace Summit in Los Angeles, I'll be on a panel that's discussing "The Business Case for Marriage Equality." The thrust of the discussion will be that corporations need to be aware of the significance of gay marriage to their economic success, and that they should be actively participating as public advocates for marriage equality in upcoming Supreme Court cases. My feeling is that they already have advocated for gay relationships, long before even national gay organizations had it on their radar.

From the earliest days when The Village Voice made history by announcing it would provide health care benefits to the domestic partners of its gay employees, to the recent declaration by Google that they would raise the salary of gay employees to cover the cost of the federal tax on those benefits, American corporations have led all other segments of society in recognizing the relationships of their gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees. Long before it became a legal issue, it was a business issue, raised to the attention of management by employees like my spouse, Ray.

Lehman had also asked Ray to take over their office in Singapore, which he declined because of the country's negative attitudes on homosexuality at the time. He likewise turned down the request that he lead the firm's office in London because the United Kingdom would not have allowed me to work then. Being transferred to Singapore and London today would be a very different experience from when Ray said, "No." Attitudes have dramatically changed in Singapore, and the laws have changed in the U.K. But the attitudes and the laws in those countries have changed because gay employees have pressured their firms to pay attention to the injustices of workplace compensation, the impact of hostile work environments, and the toll on profits of punitive laws.

Before the United States Supreme Court hears the two significant cases on gay marriage headed its way – the suit filed by the State of Massachusetts charging that the Federal Government's Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) discriminates against the citizens of the Commonwealth and their right to full marriage benefits, and the suit filed on whether the State of California can legally bar gay marriage – most Fortune 500 corporations are already providing equal treatment for their gay employees and their spouses. And even if the Supreme Court rules against the right of gay people to legally marry, most corporations will continue to recognize the relationships of their gay employees as equal to the marriages of their heterosexual employees.

It would be great if the more than 60 companies that came out publicly in support of affirmative action in 2003 also did so in "Friend of the Court" briefs for the two cases now heading to the

Supreme Court. If 3M, Coca-Cola, General Electric, Hewlett-Packard, Intel, Johnson & Johnson, Kraft Foods, Microsoft, Nike, PepsiCo, Procter & Gamble, Reebok, and Xerox all publicly put their names behind gay marriage as they did for affirmative action, it might make a difference in how Justice Anthony Kennedy, considered the swing vote in the deeply divided partisan court, might vote. But if they do publicly support gay marriage, it will be because the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees and their heterosexual allies in those firms ask them to. If the companies don't publicly take a stand, we all need to acknowledge that these cases wouldn't even be considered was it not for the long history of corporations publicly normalizing gay relationships. And they did so because their employees asked them to.