

# Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

---

## Stepping Outside Our Comfort Zones

Posted: 7 September 2011, 8:45AM

The religious parents of a gay man are coming from the Bible Belt to see their gay son get married on Fire Island in a few weeks. I called them in advance to walk them through the ceremony at which I'll be officiating. They later called their son to say how much they appreciated being prepared for what the event would look and feel like. Their anxiety was lower.

When we leave our comfort zones, as this mom and dad are doing by departing the security of their heterosexual, Southern lives to travel north to one of the gay Meccas of the world, two things usually happen to us. We initially feel anxious about the unknown and how we're going to find our footing, and we realize that we have the opportunity to grow in ways otherwise not possible.

As anyone who has traveled to a foreign country can attest, the fear of the unknown passes when we begin to feel safe. When we learn a few words of the language, and get back smiles for our efforts, or when we enjoy the spicy food rather than get sick from it, we start to see that we are not personally threatened, and we're able to open ourselves up to new experiences. We can then expand our knowledge and understanding of different ways of being or thinking in our lifetime. But, though stimulating, risk taking can be exhausting, and ultimately, there's no place like home. After a while, we long for the comfort of the familiar. The loving and proud parents from Savannah will have a great time at their son's wedding, especially now that they know what to expect, but when it's over, they won't long to stay in the Pines.

A couple of days ago, I had a 52-year-old, gay man on my boat in Provincetown who had read all of my gay affirmation books, but was not yet out to his parents. He was afraid of leaving the comfort zone of his closet, and of forcing them to leave theirs. I urged him to confirm for them what they probably already know, so that their relationships with each other could be honest, and therefore possibly intimate. It is scary to shake things up, but it can also be life-transforming. In this case, coming out to his parents would not be like going to a wedding on Fire Island because once he'd taken the step into honest living, he couldn't go back to the comfort of his former life.

In a couple of days, I'm doing a webinar for the national workplace organization, Out and Equal, on how best to do training on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues. I assert that attendance at diversity training needs to be mandated, because if attendance is voluntary, many people who most need the education won't come. Why would they leave their comfort zones if they didn't have to? Forcing people to experience something they would prefer not to know about makes it far more difficult to open them up to new thinking than it would if their participation was voluntary. But it can still be life transforming—if it is done with respect, awareness, and good humor, which I tried to show the parents of my gay friend. It's been my experience that corporate executives are generally very happy that they were required to attend my presentations because they consistently say they learned something important that they would have otherwise avoided.

But changes in attitude don't come easily. Growing pains are often avoided if possible. Therefore, successful diversity training in a corporation requires that the executives and employees be exposed to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues more than once. Becoming truly familiar with the unfamiliar requires frequent exposure. My friend's Southern Christian parents need not go back to Fire Island for them to love their son, but they will never be able to make Fire Island feel like home, unless they go there more than once. When my boat companion comes out to his folks, it won't be enough for them to understand how he is different from what they expected from a straight son. They will need consistent help in understanding his life, or they will otherwise tuck the knowledge of his homosexuality into a small drawer in their comfort zone.

As I recently explained over an iced, decaf, skinny, extra mocha latte to a young, straight financial advisor who spoke of his work with wealthy gay clients, straight people need constant exposure to gay people if they are to forever leave what was once the safe world of heterosexual privilege. In order for straight men and women to feel at home with gay and lesbian people, they need to understand and reject heterosexist assumptions, such as heterosexuality being nature's intention. Additionally, the young, straight wealth manager needed to be comfortable with people assuming that he was gay. It's nothing to be ashamed of.

Gay and lesbian people need more than occasional encounters with transgender people in order for them to be completely at ease with the continuum of gender identity and gender expression. In reaction to heterosexual bullying, many gay men and women have created comfort zones that exclude non-traditional expressions of gender. To fully embrace their own transgender nature, gay and lesbian people need to let go of the security that came with identifying themselves as "real men" and "real women." They will otherwise never be dependable allies to transgender people.

Being single and inviting people to dinner, dating someone not your type, reading an op-ed piece written by a Republican, eating vegetables as a main course, not being home for Christmas, sitting next to a priest or rabbi on an airplane, coming out to your folks, going against your will to a diversity class, and telling friends about attending the wedding of your gay son, can unnerve us. But, that's the best reason we should do them. There are many foreign experiences we would rather avoid, but repeatedly exposing ourselves to the things that scare us is guaranteed to make us grow into happier, healthier people, with more places and people with whom we feel comfortable.