

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Religious Beliefs: What Do You Do in This Situation?

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One of the most powerful tools we have to help men and women in the workplace become confident and competent in proactively including gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender colleagues in corporate life is reading or watching a dramatization of a typical problem and creating a good course of action.

For the next three weeks, I'm sharing scenarios that help illustrate common challenges that gay and transgender employees face in feeling truly valued. Twenty-five years ago, when we first began corporate diversity training on these issues, the unwelcoming experiences of gay and transgender people were more dramatic, such as seeing offensive graffiti in the restroom, or finding their workstation or personal property vandalized. As more and more people have put faces on being gay or transgender, the open hostility has been replaced by subtle but no less alienating behaviors.

Please read the following scenario, and consider how best to respond to what many gay and transgender people would say is a common experience even in a corporation considered a champion on these issues:

Scenario One: Sexual Orientation & Religious Beliefs

Kate, a lesbian woman in her 30s, is a highly regarded team member at her company and one of her group's top producers. She has been with the firm for three years. Tony is her boss. He has been with the firm for 20 years. He's fond of Kate and has mentored her since her arrival at the firm.

Kate drops into Tony's office very excited. Tony looks up, smiles, and says "Nice going on the Brown account. They love working with you. What's up?"

"I'm getting married and I want you to come. Lucy and I have set the date three months from today, and we really want you and Alice to be there. Please don't say no. Every time I invite you to a social event, you can't make it, but this time you have no excuse. It's three months away. Tell me that you and your wife will come. Say yes."

Tony looks very uncomfortable. He fumbles for words. "Congratulations, Kate, and thank you for inviting Alice and me. I don't think we can make it, though."

"Why not?" Kate asks.

"I think you know why not," he replies.

"No, I don't." she says.

"Kate, I like you very much as you know, but Alice and I can't come to your wedding. Our religious beliefs are very clear about the homosexual lifestyle. Alice would never agree to go, and I can't see how I could give witness to your marriage. I want you to be happy, but I don't condone what you're doing."

"I can't believe this," Kate replies in shock. "I mean, I heard that you were a religious man, but I didn't think that meant you were a homophobe. It's not a 'lifestyle', Tony. It's a life. We aren't going to be having sex at the wedding. We're telling each other that we want to spend the rest of our lives together in love. The state sanctions our marriage. The company gives Lucy health care benefits. You've known I was a lesbian since I came on board. Why didn't you say something before?"

"Because I hoped how I felt about your lifestyle... life, or whatever, would never come up. I'm sorry, Kate. You know I think you're our team leader. People love working with you. Our clients are crazy about you. Why do we have to screw it all up by bringing our private lives into this?"

"Tony, that's a picture of you and Alice and the kids on your desk! You bring your private life into work every day. I'm sorry. This is a deal breaker for me. I can't stay in your department. I'm grateful for everything you've done for me, but I'm not able to come to work every day knowing that my boss disapproves of my life. No offense, Tony, but for me it's become a hostile work environment."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Kate. I had no intention of hurting your feelings. But if that's the way you feel, I'm not about to change my religious beliefs to make you comfortable. I'll talk to Bill about placing you in another group."

Insights

Does Kate have a right to expect that Tony would come to her wedding?

Should Tony have accepted the invitation as a representative of the firm and let his wife stay at home?

Did the use of "trigger" words make this discussion less productive than it might have been?

How do we successfully navigate religious feelings and sexual orientation issues?

Responses

Had Tony discussed his religious beliefs with Kate soon after she joined his team, this scenario and the hurt feelings on both sides would not have taken place. Though Tony doesn't owe Kate an explanation of his personal beliefs, being a successful manager who is proactively inclusive would have prompted him to create bridges of understanding right away. He might have said in a one-on-one conversation, "Kate, I want to share with you, before you hear it from someone else, that my wife and I are more conservative than most people with our religious beliefs. Be assured though that I keep my personal moral values separate from my work life. I know that you're a gay woman, and I

want you to always feel as a valued member of this team. I'm eager to have you share your unique perspectives with the group and to participate fully in all aspects of corporate life. If ever you feel or fear that my religious beliefs are impacting our relationship, I want you to tell me."

It might then have taken Kate a while to determine if she was comfortable working on Tony's team, but if he was true to his word, she might not just work well with him but also build a friendship. Her ability to do so would depend upon his skill in truly making her feel safe and valued. That would probably require good diversity training in which Tony learned the proper terminology to use when referring to Kate's sexual orientation, such as never using the word "lifestyle".

Kate might end up inviting Tony to her wedding, but would be better prepared to have him kindly decline for unspecified reasons. If invited, Tony might decide to attend as a representative of the firm without feeling the need to bring his wife. If Tony made it a practice to accept the invitations of other staff members to their important social events, it would be necessary for him to be consistent and to attend Kate's wedding.

Kate needs to become more aware that it is not necessarily homophobia if a person uses a term such as lifestyle or explains that his or her religion views homosexual behavior as a sin, though the word is offensive because it suggests that being gay or lesbian is a choice, and the statement regarding what constitutes a sin contributes to a workplace feeling hostile. Many people who misuse terms or feel free to express religious views at another person's expense are simply in need of clear guidance from their diversity departments.