

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

The Greatest Generation of Workers

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Much has been made—and rightly so—of the fortitude of the generation that fought World War II, but little is said of their children, the greatest generation of workers. At no time in human history have people been required to stretch so far beyond their emotional comfort zones to understand and value others who represent many differences, to be relocated so often, to be forced to learn new skills in order to survive, and to lack so much security in their jobs.

In the past 50 years, the average person in most Western cultures has been called upon to treat with professional respect as an equal team member people they were raised since childhood to fear and hate. This generation of workers has done so not without struggle but more so with grace, acceptance, and understanding. And no one says to them, "Thank you." This same generation has been forced to give up white, male, Christian, and heterosexual privilege. Their families have needed to be flexible enough to change schools, doctors, dentists, and all else that was familiar in order to accommodate reassignments. And few employees could trust that the company they signed on to serve would maintain ownership, size, purpose, or benefits.

Consider the generation of male workers who grew up with the message that women were designed to be housewives, the white worker whose only experience with a black person was at a distance, the English-speaking person without skills in any other language, the heterosexual worker who only knew derogatory terms for gay men and women, the traditional male or female who laughed with the audience at actors in drag, the Jewish worker who was used to being with people who valued his or her religion, the Muslim worker who wasn't used to being feared, the able-bodied worker who had never thought about getting into an elevator in a wheelchair, the older worker who assumed that his or her opinion would carry the day, the Armenian worker who never imagined sharing a cubicle with a Turk, the fundamentalist Christian who thought the Bible would guide everyone's life, and any other worker who found that in order to be seen as a valuable team member they needed to learn to find comfort in the presence of the unknown, and to accept that no one group had a claim to power.

What generation of worker has ever been sent to work and live in other cultures—both domestic and foreign—as consistently as this? What generation has had to abandon with such regularity the dream that their sons and daughters might follow in their footsteps and work a lifetime for the same company? What generation has had their heads spin with such regularity at the radically changing nature of corporate supremacy, when firms such as General Motors—once the most powerful company in the world—would seek a government bailout, cease production of the cars driven proudly by previous generations, and try to sell their stock at one dollar a share?

The resilience, adaptability, willingness to go with the flow, and the enthusiastic buy-in to the ideal of valuing diversity of this generation of workers—now nearing retirement or already praying for the financial stability of Social Security—are what make it the greatest in history. But books won't be written to sing their praise. They won't be thanked by subsequent generations of corporate managers

and employees. We are too preoccupied with what we perceive as greed on Wall Street and the failure of the government to assure national financial stability to focus on the very people who have seen us through the most dramatic shift in workplace culture since the Industrial Revolution. As one who forced colleagues to grow far beyond their comfort zone with my own difference, and who has watched in awe for the past 35 years as workers across the globe have put the time, energy, and their full attention to understanding and valuing difference, I am exceedingly grateful for the heroism I have witnessed in the workplace.

Back in 1976, when I was a 26-year-old columnist for the Catholic diocesan newspaper in Detroit, I came out as gay and watched in horror as the cohesion of the staff was destroyed and the mission of the paper was sidetracked. For many years, I lived with disappointment in how little support I received from my friends in the office. But when I think about how foreign my sexual orientation made me and how frightened they all had been raised to be of what I represented, I marvel that they did as well as they did at the time. And I thank them for being in the first wave of heterosexual workers to have to deal with gay issues in the workplace. They were way ahead of their time.

When I reflect on my history of working with heterosexuals in the U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia, Singapore and Hong Kong, and how hard they all have sought to improve their skills in responding confidently and competently to their gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender colleagues and clients, I can get teary with awe and gratitude. Remembering that they have done so on all other areas of diversity makes each of them heroes in my life. Though I never fail to thank those with whom I work for their enthusiastic participation, I fear that they, and all others in their generation, do not get the full credit they are due.

So, here's a toast to the greatest generation of workers. May they know in their hearts how powerfully they have impacted the lives of all future generations by being on the front lines during the unsettling era of global, corporate, cultural change. They faced down their fears and made enormous sacrifices at a time of unnerving instability. The sense of safety and value that future generations will experience in the workplace are due to the heroic efforts of these good people.