

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Can We Compare Our Oppression?

Posted: 28 Jan 2010 2:00 AM PDT

In response to my bringing up the issue of racism in a [recent piece on homophobia and transphobia](#), I heard from one reader who objected to my making any comparison.

“Speaking as one white person to another,” she said, “...it is wrong for white people to use black civil rights progress as an analogy for their own *self benefiting* civil rights work... Piggy backing on the political credibility of other people who are less-powerful and more-targeted is a sort of ‘political theft’.”

This often-cited opinion is more commonly expressed by some people of color who object to any comparison that is made between gay oppression and black oppression. Some of them feel that race is a given and sexual orientation is a choice, that black people can't hide in the closet but gay people can, and/or that the horrors of historic racism are far worse than that suffered by homosexuals throughout history.

Though as a privileged white male, I'm most intent not to add further to the burden experienced by others, as a veteran of most civil rights movements, and as a person who has let go of my desire to make everyone happy, I strongly disagree with the concept of “political theft”, and I reject the idea that I have no right to compare oppressions. I don't equate them, but as an educator I find them useful tools in helping people see how ignorance is the parent of fear.

Another person responded angrily to the same opinion piece because I dared to speak about transphobia without being transsexual. A transsexual woman wrote, “I find your comments not just misguided, but outright offensive... Accept that this is not all about you as a gay male and that you do not know better than transpeople about what transphobia is. You are wrong, and in serious need of some diversity training yourself.”

Once again, though I would love to have every transgender person in my corner, I know better than to assume that a transsexual person is an authority on transgender issues, any more than a gay person is necessarily an authority on sexual orientation, or that every person of color is an authority on racism. What we all are authorities on are the details of our own lives. To venture as an educator beyond those experiences requires more.

Every minority group in world history, including African Americans, has referenced the struggles of other minority groups in articulating their feelings of oppression. The songs of solidarity sung by slaves in cotton fields referenced the flight of the Jews from Pharaoh's Egypt. We're all guilty of so-called “political theft”. Such comparisons allow us to frame our existence. To say that it is wrong for a white person to reference the black experience because of our privilege is nonsense. Every great African American civil rights leader has made the comparison between the struggle

against racism and the struggle against homophobia like the cheer we used to chant in our early gay marches, “Gay/Straight, Black/White – Same Issue, Same Fight”.

Most African Americans understand the link between our civil rights movements, especially those who have suffered because of their race. When a black member of my audience tells me that he or she objects to my referencing racism, I thank him or her for the comment and assure them that I understand, but I don’t assume they speak for all black people, certainly not the leaders with whom I’ve worked over the years, and I let the audience know what Coretta Scott King and Senator John Lewis had to say about it.

As one who has spent time in Africa, I am aware of the resentment that some black people there have of privileged black Americans referring to themselves as “African”. Some of the people there feel strongly that blacks in America know nothing about being African. Is it “political theft” for a privileged black American to identify as African American? Should a black American listen to that complaint and quit referring to himself or herself as African American?

Likewise, when a transgender person tells me that I am wrong in my definitions or in my understanding of the issues, should I quit identifying myself as an educator on gay and transgender workplace issues? Do I only have the right to speak on gay concerns? If I ever got such feedback from a transgender person in a public forum, I would affirm that his or her life struggles are beyond my full understanding, and I would welcome their perspective in the discussion. But I would not feel that they speak for all transgender people, and I would cite the views of the transgender people with whom I have worked over the past 35 years.

When guiding heterosexual business people who are trying to become more competent and confident in their response to gay and transgender colleagues, I urge them to trust their life experiences and their inner wisdom. “Do not be intimidated,” I say. “Being gay does not make a person an authority on homosexuality. Gay people do not all agree on everything—even the terminology I have suggested you use. Be patient with yourself and keep a sense of humor. There are going to be gay and transgender people you like, and there will be gay and transgender people that you do not like. There will be gay and transgender people who are emotionally healthy, and there will be gay and transgender people—just like heterosexual people—who are emotionally unhealthy. If in doubt, ask for help from the leaders of your gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Employee Resource Group, your Director of Diversity and Inclusion, or contact me.”

Human Resource professionals and those working in Diversity and Inclusion also need to trust their life experiences, their awareness of other oppressions, and their inner wisdom. It serves no one if they are intimidated by each and every minority person who tells them what to believe, how to talk, or what to do. Accept everyone and everything as valuable input, check in with those who may have broader and more seasoned experiences, and then act with humble confidence, but not with the guilt of a privileged person who is afraid of offending someone. Oppression is oppression regardless of the form it takes. It always has been, and it always will be.