

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Three Questions

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At a meeting this week in Atlanta of former Surgeon General David Satcher's Advisory Board on matters of national sexual health, our very diverse group was asked to brainstorm on five or more things we believe will happen in the next fifty years that would influence how we strategize to meet our goals. I suggested:

- *The U.S. will be bilingual;
- *China and India will be the superpowers that influence world culture;
- *Newspapers and books printed on paper will disappear;
- *A gay person and his or her legally-recognized same-sex spouse and their children will be in the White House;
- *Wars will be fought over water;
- *Young people won't feel the need to label their sexual orientation;
- *Religion will lose its influence in the U.S. as it has in Europe.

On my way back to Ft. Lauderdale from Atlanta, I sat next to a woman with whom I struck up a conversation when she asked me about the Amazon Kindle from which I was reading. I ended up telling her what I had been doing in Atlanta, that I wrote and spoke on gay issues, and that I was eager to get home. In response to my query about her work, she told me that she had recently been on Dick Cheney's staff as his political advisor. I shared that I was a lifelong Democrat and didn't agree with most of what the Bush administration had done, but that I suspect the reason we didn't have a constitutional amendment barring gay marriage was that Cheney's love for his daughter Mary prompted him to privately block all such efforts. My traveling companion didn't confirm or deny my theory, but simply smiled and said, "They're a very close family." We shook hands as we departed the plane and I watched her walk ahead of me toward baggage claim, on her way to meet a new client as a public relations consultant.

When I got home, our Sun-Sentinel newspaper had an editorial cartoon that had a dinosaur wandering off with the name "Naugle" on his back, indicating that the man with antiquated, hostile attitudes toward gay people was finally leaving office as mayor of Ft. Lauderdale.

My traveling companion on the plane is not a dinosaur, but like Jim Naugle, she does represent to me the passing of an era in which conservative fundamentalists have had far too much influence over the lives of most Americans who did not share those beliefs. It's my feeling that we have spent way too much time and given way too much attention to those people with

“strongly-held” religious beliefs. It’s been true not just in government and in our efforts to address matters of national sexual health, such as whether condoms are an acceptable tool that will help us stop the spread of AIDS, but also in the workplace. We have been preoccupied with the feelings of a small handful of religious conservatives who object to every effort made to create a safe and welcoming environment for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people.

By way of illustration, at the end of a recent workshop that I conducted, I was asked to model answers for three questions that are often posed in the workplace by those who oppose corporate support of gay people. Here are the questions and my responses:

Can a person change his or her sexual orientation?

Psychiatrists have had some success in helping bisexual people focus their erotic feelings on people of the other gender, but no one has ever successfully changed his or her heterosexual or homosexual orientation. Behavior and Identity can be changed but feelings of attraction can't be forced to change. Even the founders and leaders of the so-called "ex-gay" movement will acknowledge that their clients are unable to completely eliminate their erotic feelings of same-sex attraction. Besides prayer and 12 Step approaches, other techniques used to "change" feelings of attraction that have been tried unsuccessfully include shock treatments, castration, and lobotomies. Homosexual men were subjected to horrible experiments in concentration camps and in mental institutions throughout the world, including in the United States. The American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association have both warned about the negative consequences of "reparative" therapies.

How can people with conservative religious or conservative social views feel fully valued in a corporation that fully values its gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees?

Most employees with conservative religious or social beliefs understand that they are not only protected against discrimination because of their status and identity as people with such affiliations or tenets, but also valued for the unique contributions they make to the workplace because of their beliefs. But an employee who feels that being fully valued at work means that his or her personal moral values or beliefs will be embraced and incorporated by their employer, set themselves up for disappointment. Corporations want employees to "bring their full selves," including their personal values, to work, but not to impose their values on their colleagues. A person, for instance, who believes strongly that abortion is murder, might wish that women who had abortions be fired by their employer, but if that is his or her criteria for feeling valued by the company he or she will be let down. Social or religious conservatives generally take issue with the sexual behavior of gay men and women. Corporations take no position on such behavior anymore than they do on divorce, co-habitation, or atheism.

Doesn't the "Safe Space" program single gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people out for special treatment? (In “Safe Space” programs, heterosexuals place a magnet in their office to indicate that the space is safe for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. The magnet usually has the symbol of the pink triangle or the rainbow flag.)

Many companies are taking or permitting extra steps such as the "Safe Space" program in their

attempts to create a safe and productive work environment for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender employees because they know that at this time in history these particular issues of diversity are more challenging for their employees than some others, such as race and gender, which in the past required extra attention like affirmative action and mandatory training on sexual harassment. The magnets that depict the pink triangle (that homosexuals were forced to wear in concentration camps), surrounded by the green circle (the international symbol of permission) are successfully used by companies as reminders of acceptance in the same way that symbols of a cigarette surround by a red circle and slash (the international symbol of prohibition) are used effectively by companies as reminders of their policy on smoking in the building. The program also exists because gay and transgender employees developed it and offered it as a suggestion to their employers as an effective means of creating a safe work environment. Other employees who feel that certain groups of employees feel unsafe and unvalued at work can also develop programs aimed at creating more productive work environments and suggest their use to management.

At some point in the next fifty years, when those who follow this generation will be bilingual and more focused on the need to conserve water, I believe they will read in their electronic newspapers about the freedom most Americans feel from religion.