

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Questions at the Dinner Table

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As anyone who has watched the hit television series, *Brothers and Sisters* knows, if you get invited to dine with the Walkers, politely decline. You will otherwise get pulled into a donnybrook of quarreling. But what if you were invited to have dinner with a handful of the people you most admire? Would you go, and what would you want to discuss?

The Internet site MySpace asks its member to say who are the people they would most like to meet. My list of those with whom I would like to spend time and ask questions include [Desmond Tutu](#), [Pema Chödrön](#), [Jimmy Carter](#), [Ellen DeGeneres](#), and [George Clooney](#). (I have [Jake Gyllenhaal](#) down too, but we wouldn't need to talk.) These well-known names are the celebrities of my mind, the people who in my eyes have become bigger than life because of their beliefs and behaviors.

Recently, I've come up with a list of lesser-known people with whom I would also very much like to have a meal and a conversation. They are gay men, lesbians, or transgender people who have distinguished themselves in the workplace. My table place cards include:

- George Kalogridis, the president at Disneyland
- Laura Liswood, a managing director at Goldman Sachs
- Margaret Stumpp, a senior vice president at Prudential Financial
- Ken McNeely, the president of AT&T California
- Marcelo Roman, the director of Global Learning at IBM
- Virasb Vahidi, director and CEO of Phorm

George and Laura are white; Margaret is a white transgender woman; Ken is black; Marcelo is Latino, and Virasb is Middle Eastern.

Before the end of the year, it is my plan to meet each of these individuals and to ask them questions about being gay, lesbian, or transgender in the workplace. Their answers will be incorporated into a DVD that I am working on with the [Stonewall Museum](#) for use by corporations during Gay Awareness Month in 2011.

What would you ask if you had the chance to talk with these corporate leaders? What would you want them to tell you about the experiences and contributions of openly gay and transgender people in the workplace—particularly if you knew that their responses would be heard by hundreds of thousands of managers and colleagues throughout the world?

Personally, I am interested in their individual stories of triumph.

- What prompted you to come out of the closet?
- Did your race, sex, or religious beliefs make coming out more or less difficult?

- What reaction did you get from your manager and coworkers?
- Do you feel you would be in your current position of leadership if you had stayed in the closet?
- How does being out impact your working relationships with others inside and outside of the company?
- Do you have any regrets about coming out or about not coming out sooner?
- What advice would you offer to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees who are considering coming out?
- Do you have any good stories about people coming out to you as a result of your being out to them?

Professionally, I would like to have these leaders in commerce talk about how their coming out has helped or hurt their employers.

- What gifts do you bring to the table because of your sexual orientation or gender identity?
- What positive or negative effect has your being out had upon attracting or losing talent?
- Has your public posture attracted or lost business for the company?
- What advice would you give to corporations on how to make it easier for gay and transgender people to come out of the closet?

I suspect that the conversations I will have with these bright shining stars of the corporate world will provide all of us with great insights into being out at work. My conversations with any of them will be at least as personally and professionally rewarding as any I might have with Desmond Tutu, Pema Chödrön, Jimmy Carter, Ellen DeGeneres, and George Clooney; it may not be as much fun for me as sitting at a table and looking at Jake Gyllenhaal, but I suspect that George, Ken, Marcelo, and Virasb would agree.