

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

The 30-Second Gay Talk

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You're assigned to train the troops fighting in Afghanistan about the new policy on openly gay people in the service. Imagine that you're huddled behind a rock with three soldiers who have been pulled from their posts to listen to you. You have 30 seconds. Start talking.

You're boarding an elevator and a colleague makes a derogatory joke about transgender people. You're a well-known Human Resources employee. Two senior managers look at you waiting for your reply. You have just eight floors to address the issue. What is your "elevator speech"?

You're sitting at a table with a straight ally, representing your company at a gay workplace conference. A gay person comes to your exhibition booth, picks up your company's give-away rainbow wrist band, and makes a lewd comment about how he might use it. He then asks the straight man if he's gay, and when he learns that he's not, he says, "Oh, what a waste." How do you respond before he walks away?

All three of these situations—the last one relayed to me on Facebook as having recently happened—require a response. Not to say anything is a gross violation of your role as an employee, not to mention the moral imperative we all have to speak up.

The U.S. Army has begun gay sensitivity training and plans to have over one million people educated by the end of the summer. They will begin with chaplains, lawyers, and investigators. Next, they will train commanders in the field, and then 2.2 million active and reserve troops. Army Command Sergeant Major Marvin Hill has said the training is forthcoming in the battlefield.

So, start talking. You have 30 seconds. With that time limit, I'd say:

"Listen up. This is a direct order from your commanding officer. Gay people are allowed to serve openly. If you harass them in any way, with jokes, religious bullying, or ostracizing, you'll be involuntarily separated. If you see it, report it. Am I clear?"

That was just 15 seconds. I'd then allow for questions.

What people need to know at the most basic level is:

1. What is the rule?
2. Where does it come from?
3. What is expected of me?
4. What are the consequences?

Thirty-second talks don't increase sensitivity. They change behaviors. That's the first goal: Stop doing the bad things you might be doing. When you have more time to talk, you help the individual understand the reason for the rule, and you put a face on the issue. Change in attitudes will follow change in behavior, if safe space and time are given to the educational process.

From the first floor to the 10th floor, you have time to say, "Oh, my. It looks like we need some more diversity training. I know you didn't have hostile intentions, but your joke is actually considered harassing behavior. The company is very serious about making this a workplace in which everyone feels safe and valued. Can you see how what you thought as 'funny' might make someone in this elevator feel unsafe or unvalued? There may be no transgender people among us, but one of us might be married to someone who is transgender, or have transgender children or family members. There are certainly transgender people who work among us. We just can't make those kinds of jokes at work or when we're representing the company offsite. I apologize if I've made you uncomfortable, but all of us are required by company policy to speak up. If we don't, we can be disciplined. As an HR person, if I hadn't said something to you, I'd deserve to be fired."

To the obnoxious, emotionally stunted gay man who felt free to speak so inappropriately in a work-related setting, I would say, "We haven't met. I'm Brian McNaught. Our company would consider what you just said as sexual harassment. Wouldn't yours? At work, or in a work-related situation such as this, we're not allowed to make sexual jokes, or to demean a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. I was embarrassed when you asked my straight colleague here if he was gay, and then told him it was a waste that he was straight. Who do you work for?"

Many people remain silent in the midst of inappropriate speech or behavior because they insist that they don't want to embarrass the person or make things worse. I think they usually are silent because they are so afraid of not being liked. There aren't a lot of people like that in my circle of friends. There ought not to be a lot of people like that in the foxhole, elevator, or conference center. It's not like it takes up a lot of your time to speak up. You can do it in 30 seconds or less.