

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Unaware of Gay Awareness or the “Agenda”

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"Does anyone know why June is the month during which your company celebrates Gay Awareness?" I asked an audience of corporate executives. Most people looked uncomfortably at the floor, and not one hand went up. After my explanation, they all seemed very pleased to understand the significance of the month, and also the reason why the rainbow flag and the pink triangle are used in promoting gay events.

Just as it's very silly to use shorthand in a text message that the recipient doesn't understand, such as "LOL" for "laugh out loud", gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees, and those working in Diversity and Inclusion, and in Human Resources, should never, ever assume that the average person understands the acronym GLBT or anything else about gay or transgender culture. Believe it or not, there are some younger gay people who have never heard of Stonewall and are afraid to admit it. And the transsexual term "MTF" for "male to female" means nothing to most people, gay or straight.

Forty years ago, the modern Gay Civil Rights Movement erupted in response to a raid by New York police officers on the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village. In the early morning of June 28, patrons of the bar fought back against the police who were attempting to arrest them for congregating as homosexuals. It was at that time that the terms "Gay Power" and "Gay Pride" first entered the popular vocabulary. In response to news of the Stonewall Rebellion, five chapters of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) were created by the end of 1969. They were in New York, Berkeley, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Jose. One year later, there were 300 chapters of GLF in the country, along with scores of other new gay-related groups that focused their attention on religion and politics. For instance, Dignity, the gay Roman Catholic group, was formed in 1969.

The Stonewall Rebellion, which began in the early morning hours of June 28 and lasted for the next two days, is the reason why June is celebrated as Gay Pride or Gay Awareness month not only in the United States but also across the globe. But the birth of the modern Gay Civil Rights Movement did not happen in a vacuum. Revolt against authority and conservative cultural standards had already taken root in American society through the Anti-war Movement, the Black Civil Rights Movement, and the counterculture of the 1960s. Nor was what happened at the bar on Christopher Street in June of 1969 the first sign of organized gay resistance in the United States. Gay men and women had formed the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles in 1952 and the Daughters of Bilitis in San Francisco in 1955. Nearly 20 years prior to drag queens in Greenwich Village screaming "brutality" at the police, gay men in suits and ties, and lesbian women in dresses were silently but quite courageously picketing for equal rights outside the White House.

Learning this history helps build the confidence of most senior managers who often feel ill-equipped by their limited understanding of gay people and their issues to effectively manage workplace concerns. These same managers are also grateful for explanations of the symbols they see used by the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Employee Resource Group (ERG) but don't understand.

These symbols include the rainbow flag and the pink triangle, which are often employed in corporate posters announcing Gay Awareness events and in "Safe Space" magnets that heterosexual colleagues sometimes post in their offices to indicate a "gay-friendly" environment.

The Gay Rainbow Flag, or "Freedom Flag," was created by Gilbert Baker in 1978 and is used internationally to represent the great diversity in the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities. Each of the six colors—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet—had meaning to Baker but is unknown to most gay people. And Baker didn't create the rainbow flag. It has been used by many groups to signify diversity and inclusion, or, in the case of the Inca people in Peru, their Andean history. When we climbed the Inca Trail in Peru, Ray and I thought the whole country was "gay friendly" until we learned that the Andean people had a different understanding of the flag than we did. However, the rainbow flag is most commonly associated today worldwide with the gay and transgender community.

The pink triangle (with the point down) was used by Nazis to identify homosexual men in Germany and in all occupied territories. Lesbians were less visible and of less concern to the Nazis in their effort to purge society of anything that might "pollute" the Master Race. If a lesbian was identified with a symbol, it was the same black triangle that all nonconforming women, such as those alleged to be witches, were forced to wear. A former symbol of death for gay people, the pink triangle is now used to symbolize strength and solidarity, and serves to remind gay men and women of what fate is always possible for a minority group in any culture.

Finally, for the 35 years that I have been publicly out of the closet as a gay man, I have heard or read about a so-called "Gay Agenda." Almost always the term is employed by social and religious conservatives who want to frighten other Americans into believing that there is a secret conspiracy to undermine heterosexual society. It is so secret, in fact, that no gay person has ever heard its details. But that has changed. A small group of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people recently met in Dallas, Texas, and came up with a "[Gay Agenda](#)" with which I completely agree, and to which I can't imagine most reasonable, fair-minded people not responding with anything other than enthusiastic assent.

These "Goals," or "Agenda," as I have come to call them, provide a good understanding to us all of what it is that most lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people seek in their lives.

1. **Dignity & Equality.** Every lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender person has inherent dignity and worth, and has the right to live free of discrimination and harassment.
2. **Family.** Every lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender person has the right to a family without legal barriers to immigration, civil marriage or raising children.
3. **Economic Opportunity.** Every lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender person has the right to economic opportunity free from discrimination in employment, public housing, accommodation, public facilities, credit, and federally funded programs and activities.
4. **Education.** Every lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender child and youth has the right to an education that is affirming, inclusive and free from bullying.
5. **National Security.** Every lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender person should have the opportunity to serve our country openly and equally in our military and foreign service.

6. **Crime.** Every lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender person should enjoy life protected against bias crimes.
7. **Health Care.** Every person should have access to affordable, high quality, and culturally competent health care without discrimination.

Speaking of "health care," for the sake of my own, I'm going to play in the garden and in the water in Provincetown, Massachusetts for the next three months without thinking about writing my two weekly blogs. I recently saw an advertisement for an automobile that said, "Summer has always belonged to children." That's true if we're talking about one's state of mind and not one's age. Please enjoy your summer as much as I intend to enjoy mine.