

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Ducky, Ducky, How's Your Neighbor?

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When I was a child, a favorite kindergarten game we played asked the question, "Ducky, ducky, how's your neighbor?" The response was, "I don't know, but I'll go see." It was the tagged person's job to then go ask the same question to another child.

In the adult version, the question is "Gay and transgender employees, how are your counterparts in other places?" And the answer today must be, "We don't know, but we'll go see." Gay and transgender people who work in corporate offices in New York need to find out how their counterparts are doing in Colorado Springs, Mobile, Singapore, and Dubai. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees in Toronto need to know what it's like to work in Calgary and those in London need to address what's happening in Bournemouth and Mumbai. If it isn't ducky, all resources need to be pulled together to ensure that corporate policy transcends cultural and regional differences, even if same-sex intimacy is punishable by law in those sites.

That was the conclusion of over 100 participants in an Out and Equal workshop entitled "ENDA Doesn't End It" led by a panel of workplace strategists: Louise Young, Daryl Herrschaft, Todd Sears, Bob Witeck, and Steve Sears. Although everyone was clear of the need for cultural competence and sensitivity, it was nevertheless agreed that the promise made by an organization to prohibit discrimination based upon gender identity and sexual orientation in Chicago has to also protect transgender and gay employees in the Philippines. Not to do so has serious consequences on the ability of the company to attract and retain talent, to market effectively to local gay and transgender consumers, and on corporate morale.

Many years ago, when my spouse Ray was a senior executive with Lehman Brothers, they asked him to take over the firm's office in Singapore. He declined because neither of us at the time imagined feeling safe as a gay couple there and we were unwilling to sacrifice happiness for financial gain. It was Singapore's loss. I've since been to Singapore to train investment banking personnel on gay and transgender workplace issues and feel that Ray and I could move there today because the environment has become more gay-friendly.

To make that happen, the firms in question—Merrill Lynch and Lehman at the time and now Goldman Sachs—made it clear through their senior executives that all employees were required to embrace the corporate policy of valuing diversity. Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) in Singapore and other areas of the Pacific Rim worked hard with human resources and diversity managers to address the issue and to provide training to all managers in the region on gay and transgender workplace concerns. Local senior executives became outspoken champions of the gay and transgender ERG and, in some instances, heterosexual allies created gay ERGs in the absence of any visible gay and transgender people.

Accenture's gay and transgender Employee Resource Group has formed a global steering committee with representatives from each region to help the firm address cultural challenges in creating safe and productive work environments for their employees throughout the world. Their effectiveness as a group was manifested in a workshop they offered at the Out and Equal conference on how to make significant inroads, with India being their working example of success.

Another group that is working hard to address these challenges and that offered guidelines for success at the conference is [The Council for Global Equality](#), to which my friend Michael Guest, openly gay former U.S. ambassador, is a founding senior adviser. Their report, *Anchoring Equality: How U.S. Corporations Can Build Equal and Inclusive Workforces*, is a must-read for anyone focused on global equity.

There are clearly obstacles in achieving goals in transcending regional and cultural differences. They include the lack of enthusiasm or conviction of local managers and of local human resources and diversity personnel; the lack of openly-gay and transgender employees; resistance from gay and transgender employees who don't want to rock the boat; the influence of institutionalized orthodox religious values; legal restrictions on same-sex intimacy; legal restrictions on the dissemination of positive information about homosexuality; the existence of other forms of diversity; the level of education, income, and job of the targeted group; and the political climate to name just a few. But none of those obstacles are insurmountable. Each can be effectively addressed if there is a will to succeed.

The will to succeed in most organizations logically falls in the lap of the organization's gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender ERG and/or in that of the managers of diversity and inclusion. Yet even in the absence of those participants, individuals whose only connection to the issue is a sense of justice can make it possible for gay and transgender people in all areas of the world to feel safe and valued at work. All it takes is a person who wonders, "How's my neighbor?" and responds, "I don't know but I'll go see."

In the past few weeks, I've been approached by corporate directors of diversity to provide training to their managers in Tokyo, Singapore, Hong Kong, Brazil, and the Bahamas. Given the economy, some of it or none of it, may occur. The important thing to realize though is that change is happening throughout the world. It's my expectation that 25 years from now there will be very few places where a gay employee would fear taking his or her spouse to work and live.