

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Two Steps for Transgender Competence

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Many (if not most) gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in the workplace don't have a clue what the word "transgender" includes, what people who are transgender need in order to feel safe and valued, nor what is considered proper terminology. ("Transvestite" and "Hermaphrodite" are no-nos.) Most Human Resource (HR) and Diversity professionals don't have answers to their questions, and the majority is afraid to ask. If that's true for them, imagine the anxiety or antipathy of the organization's senior executives and middle managers. The "T" has been added to the "GLB" by many companies to secure a 100% rating on the Human Rights Campaign's (HRC) [Corporate Equality Index](#). Appearing to be inclusive is essential in the war for talent. But the "T" is often privately experienced by the "GLBs" and others as an unwanted second-cousin, forced into the family at an inconvenient time, whose anticipated appearance or behavior creates feelings of embarrassment or dread. It's "anticipated" because many companies don't have a visible transgender person and most gay, lesbian, and bisexual people don't have any friends who are transgender.

Nevertheless, vast numbers of Fortune 500 companies include "gender identity" and sometimes "gender expression" in their non-discrimination policies. The pending Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), which has the support of President Obama, prohibits discrimination based on gender identity, which is defined as including mannerisms and cross-dressing. Given that, we asked a group of 100 people at the Out and Equal Conference in Orlando recently what needed to be done in the workplace to "ensure awareness of all transgender issues and to properly address the unique needs of transgender employees".

Though she could barely speak above a painfully hoarse whisper, a veteran of the gay and lesbian civil rights movement and a treasured Raytheon engineer communicated her passionate feelings clearly to the assembled group: "We have to *commit* to the 'T'." She said it three or four times in a row to make sure we got the message: Gay and Transgender Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) and HR personnel must commit themselves to the issues facing transgender people. Otherwise, we're going to fail to make any progress in creating a welcoming work environment for transsexuals, cross-dressers, and others on the gender continuum regardless of corporate policy or federal law.

Dr. Louise Young was one of five group leader/panelists at the workshop, titled "ENDA Doesn't End It". The consensus of all of the groups was that immediate education was required at every level, most especially among members of the ERGs and among HR and Diversity professionals. As I suggest repeatedly, "Ignorance is the parent of fear, and fear is often the parent of hatred. We fear what we don't understand." That has certainly been true for me, especially on the subject of transgender people, and I believe it is also true for most would-be allies.

It was the valuable lessons learned from my experience with people who are different from me that prompted me to argue, ever so gently, with Louise about what comes first, education or

commitment. I feel that it's very hard to make a true commitment to something you don't understand. I can make a decision to focus my attention on an issue, but unless my heart is in it, my commitment doesn't have much staying power. But, when I have a face to go with the issue, when I have a personal connection with a cause, then it has both my conviction and my passion—the essential ingredients of commitment.

I consider myself to be very lucky in having several wonderful friends who are transgender: Mary Ann Horton, Michael, Seth, Christine McGinn, and Joanne Herman. And I'm building new friendships with Jamison Green, Stephanie Battaglino, and Max Green. Without hearing their stories and without their patient responses to my many questions, I would have remained unconsciously incompetent on transgender issues and unable to make a significant commitment to transgender equality.

For those people who would like to immediately commit themselves to the issue by becoming more confident and competent in their personal understanding of transgender people, I strongly suggest two steps. The first is to find a face to go with the issue. My friends—especially Joanne Herman and Stephanie Battaglino—are eager and most able to speak at organizational meetings on what it means to be transgender and how best to effectively address transgender workplace concerns. (To secure contact information, please [write to me](#).) The second and equally important step is to get help learning the language. To that end, Joanne Herman has an excellent new book entitled *Transgender Explained for Those Who Are Not*. You can get this wonderful guide at [Amazon.com](#) for less than \$15. It's a quick and easy way to become consciously competent.

Though I speak about transgender issues, address it in my [book](#), and in my [Manager's Guide for Gay & Transgender Workplace Issues](#), there really is no substitute for having a person who is transgender tell his or her own story and answer questions about what support they look for from others in the workplace. It is that personal connection that will enable all of us to get the education we need to make the personal commitment to the "T" we *must* make at this time.