

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

What Makes You So Special?

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Next June, I suspect there will be considerable interest in the release of *The A-Team*, a film version of the popular television program from the mid-1980s about a group of Special Forces men, each with his own skill, who work together to solve problems. We see the same format in today's most popular television programs such as *NCIS*, *The Mentalist*, *CSI*, *Bones*, and *Law and Order*. Teams are pulled together based upon the unique contributions of each member. They succeed because they value each other's gifts.

If you were in the corporate role of Col. John "Hannibal" Smith, the A-Team leader whose favorite line was, "I love it when a plan comes together", would you add to the team a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender person because they had unique skills acquired from their life experiences? Do gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people imagine themselves as perfect choices for the A-Team, or do they feel they belong in the B-Team?

The answers to those questions will determine the extent to which organizations value and utilize their gay and transgender employees. One question posed recently at our "ENDA Doesn't End It" workshop at the Out and Equal conference had the 100 attendees thinking about the unique value we bring to the table, and what examples we had of organizations actually leveraging their gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees.

If you ask the average gay or transgender person if he or she believes that people with disabilities, Jews, people of color, older workers, younger workers, war veterans, and women, among others, bring unique gifts to the table because of their perspectives, they have no difficulty saying yes. But these same average gay and transgender people are often challenged when asked "So, what do you bring to the table?" And if they don't know, will the corporate A-Team leader who is making choices about prospective members?

With billions of gay and transgender dollars available to be spent on products and services, it's quite obvious to most people that at the very least gay and transgender employees can help a company more effectively market itself to the community. One example of this is the openly gay private banker at Credit-Suisse mentoring two straight colleagues on how to create trust with, and successfully reach wealthy gay and lesbian clients. Such advice might include avoiding irritating words such as "sexual preference", and "alternative lifestyle", as well as what periodicals are most popular with wealthy gay people and what organizations attract them. Another example is the successful strategy taken by Chubb at the strong urging of their gay employees to create sales brochures with pictures of lesbian and gay couples on their covers.

Bob Witeck and Wes Combs of Witeck-Combs have helped many firms such as American Airlines recapture a lost gay clientele after a public relations fiasco. American Airlines would not have achieved their current great success in the gay market had they not sought out and followed the

advice of gay people. It is for that reason that some large firms have instituted mentoring programs in which the senior executive receives guidance from, rather than gives it to, individuals in the organization's gay and transgender Employee Resource Group (ERG), which is more accurately titled an Employee Business Partner.

Beyond helping the firm market effectively, an openly gay or transgender employee is a very valuable tool in attracting gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender talent to an organization. They are also extraordinarily gifted educators on gay and transgender issues for the company's human resource and diversity professionals, as well as for senior and middle managers. The gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender ERGs at Merck and Chubb are currently traveling throughout the country, two by two, presenting self-designed diversity training in their companies regional offices with phenomenal success.

But those aren't the only reasons the A-Team leader should be eager to sign up gay and transgender talent. If you're looking for people with sensitivity, awareness, the ability to think outside the box, risk-taking experience, perseverance, personal awareness, courage, and authenticity, consider the qualities required for a gay man, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender person to grow up in an unwelcoming culture that questioned their sanity, normality, and goodness, and nevertheless affirmed themselves as worthy of respect and love. Most of these same people, despite all odds, have secured a good education, matured socially, come out to family and friends despite the fear of rejection, found love, and built a healthy, happy life for themselves. Like members of other minority groups, most gay and transgender people have been strengthened rather than defeated by the challenges in life they have faced. The lessons they have learned and the skills they have been forced to develop give them a competitive edge in many personal and professional situations.

So, should the corporate A-Team leader be eager to make these seasoned survivors members of their group? They should if they want the plan to come together.