

LGBTQ Support in the Workplace

By Carolyn Ruck

According to the Welcoming Project, more than 9 million American adults identify themselves as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or questioning). They represent diverse ages, racial/ethnic backgrounds, religious convictions, and belief systems, as do their allies. *This fact, combined with increasing employment protections, means employees and employers are likely to see LGBTQ issues arising in the workplace.*

First the good news: In the past decade, many organizations have gained a greater understanding of how diversity impacts workplace culture and the financial bottom line. Yet, when employers call an EAP for guidance with LGBTQ workplace issues, their apprehension still resonates at a fairly high level.

Lack of awareness, vague policies, and the lack of diversity programs and management training can be stressful and costly for an employer. For instance, an employee's gender change disclosure, if not properly handled, can lead to any combination of complaints, interpersonal conflicts, rumor, or claims of a hostile work environment, harassment or discrimination.

EAP Guidance

However, employers that proactively develop and implement workplace policies that address harassment and discrimination against all employees – *with an EA professional's help* – have an opportunity to enhance corporate reputation, and increase job satisfaction and employee morale. Results may include *greater* productivity, *less* staff turnover, and *fewer* risks of litigation.

Such strategies also make perfect sense because discrimination cases are costly in terms of time, legal fees, and goodwill. Companies with established diversity programs and management systems to address and resolve charges of discrimination and harassment may be at less risk for employment-related lawsuits.

An EAP practitioner can *enlighten* and *ease* this organizational adjustment process. An experienced consultant can offer understanding and information about the unique personal issues faced by an LGBTQ employee. An EA professional can coordinate discussions and educational options for C-Suite executives, managers, and staff, as well as offer guidance about organizational issues that will likely arise when, for instance, Jim transitions into Joanne, or vice versa.

A Process that Requires Attention and Planning

Historically, many LGBTQ individuals would change jobs rather than stay on a job and face discrimination, harassment, or termination due to being non-gender conforming.

However, recent trends suggest that individuals who identify as LGBTQ are increasingly willing to risk "coming out" at work. For example, when a transsexual, usually after years of internal angst, decides to undergo complete gender transition, the results are impossible to conceal at work.

Consider how this level of disclosure compares with other employees who choose when and how to reveal personal information at work, including sexual orientation. Transsexuals who plan to remain with their employer while transitioning don't have that option. A transsexual employee is obligated to "come out" to his/her employer in order to comply with treatment requirements to live full time in his/her new gender role for at least one year after irreversible surgery. Employers become involved in the gender transition out of necessity.

Many workplaces have been emerging from an unspoken "don't ask, don't tell" culture toward inclusiveness and respect for differences. Misinformation and misconception about transsexuals can cloud effective organizational responses.

Facts to be Aware of

FACT: Transsexuals experience a significant amount of discrimination because of their gender identity or expression. Some are also targets of

homophobia and hate crimes whether they are same-sex oriented or not.

FACT: A gender transition is a long process with workplace disclosures typically occurring at later stages. Per medical standards of care, a transsexual must have a minimum of one year of gender transition counseling and will progressively appear as their target gender to friends, family, in public and eventually at work.

FACT: Gender identification is NOT the same thing as sexual orientation. Just like anyone else, transsexuals can be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual or asexual. Gender identity is who a person *is*. It is *not* descriptive of an individual's sex life.

FACT: When a male-to-female transsexual presents as a woman, she should be regarded as a woman, just as a female-to-male transsexual should be thought of as a man.

FACT: Genital surgery is *one way* to align physically on the outside with what has always been felt/experienced on the inside. The process also includes psychotherapy, living in the other

gender, taking hormones, resocialization, and other adjustments.

FACT: Gender and sexuality exist on a spectrum of physiological and psychological characteristics. Research indicates that throughout history there have been people whose internal gender identity was different from their birth gender.

Best Practice Guidelines

As stated earlier, employers that proactively develop and implement workplace policies that address harassment and discrimination against all employees have an opportunity to enhance corporate reputation, and increase job satisfaction and employee morale.

Consequently, the following are best practice guidelines regarding LGBTQ issues in the workplace. While specifically designed for managers and human resource representatives, the following are also recommendations that *anyone* in the workplace, including line workers and outside consultants like EAPs, should keep in mind:

❖ *Meet with a transitioning or other LGBTQ employee.* Keep an open mind and acknowledge your level of experience in such matters. Ask questions and express a willingness to learn, adapt, and support.

EAP's Role in Promoting Diversity

Employee assistance programs can play a major role in promoting workplace diversity and creating respectful workplaces by:

❖ **Developing seminars, workshops, posters, or other resources** that increase awareness about racial, cultural, and other differences may prove useful.

❖ **Teaching others that silence is NOT golden.** Many times, we don't say anything about an individual's "differences" because we want to avoid appearing rude or because we're caught "off guard." Generally speaking, people are not comfortable discussing someone's culture, sexual orientation, etc. And yet, these areas may profoundly affect the workplace. While it's important

to be tactful, saying nothing doesn't work either. Silence perpetuates problems and may even be viewed as a sign of approval of an inappropriate action. Remember: We see things as WE are, not as SOMEONE else is. This understanding can help with perceptions, since perceptions become judgments and, eventually lead to action.

❖ **Showing managers how to lead by example.** Whether they want to or not, managers sometimes need to talk about sensitive issues with their employees. Learning to respect others will help prevent potential conflicts and other problems.

Sources: "Linguistic and Cultural Diversity – Building on America's Strengths" and "Achieving Cultural Competence" by the Administration on Aging.



❖ *Be empathetic.* Along similar lines, while you may be hearing about an LGBTQ employee for the first time, bear in mind that this individual has probably been aware of their status for years and has likely been engaged in psychotherapy. Be empathetic.

❖ *Review current company policies.* Look over policies regarding harassment and discrimination. Should employee relationship issues arise, these documents will help guide responses.

❖ *Recognize it may be necessary to not only review, but revise your organization's non-discrimination and anti-harassment policies.* An example would be, if the company receives staff complaints about being uncomfortable working with an LGBTQ employee or there are concerns regarding joint bathroom use. Consider suggesting an EAP referral to help that individual adjust to workplace realities.

❖ *Strive for endorsement of company anti-harassment and respect policies from the top down.* Once the tone of acceptance and respect for diversity has been established and conveyed from key leaders, front line supervisors are usually more motivated to put policies into everyday practice. Unfortunately, even if an organization has specific policies covering protected classes, some claims of harassment and discrimination may arise. This is why LGBTQ training for managers and staff – especially when led by an objective third party like the EAP – can be beneficial.

❖ *In the case of a transitioning employee, obtain time frames in order to determine company timelines for responding to changes.* For instance, Jim plans to return as Joanne after a medical leave of absence in early October. Most employers coordinate supervisor and staff trainings prior to the employee's return to work.

❖ *In the case of a transitioning employee, include this individual in most aspects of organizational planning and response.* After all, you'll be involved in some very personal disclosures. Assure the employee of your support.

❖ *In such instances, plan to follow up privately and periodically to see how the transitioning employee is doing.* This is especially important

during the first three months after his or her new gender appearance becomes apparent at work.

❖ *Avoid focusing on genital surgery versus the broader scope of the transition process.* Not all transgender individuals have genital or breast reconstructive surgery but most will have hormone therapy, vocal retraining and cosmetic or facial treatments. When I first started consulting with organizations, many HR reps seemed fixated on evidence of genital surgery as the marker for when the employee should use new gender-identified bathrooms.

❖ *The date the employee presents as his/her target gender, is the day to begin using the restroom that reflects his/her new gender.* The employee should not be forced to use the bathroom that matches his/her previous gender.

❖ *Remind staff that their transgender co-worker is still essentially the same person.* Encourage the same levels of work and social interactions.

❖ *Determine which customers and/or vendors need to be updated about the change in gender.* This includes “when” and “how.”

❖ *Plan for administrative and benefit updates to ensure they are completed by the day the transsexual employee begins appearing at work as their target gender.* This includes health insurance and other benefit changes, photo ID, name in company directory, etc.

Summary

EA professionals are able to highlight the importance of organizational inclusiveness, make the business case for it, and find ways to untangle organizational webs of fear and uncertainty. The EAP is a valuable resource in this regard, so employers should be sure to take advantage of it.

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Addressing Prejudicial Barriers



❖ **Admit that prejudice exists.** Acknowledge that because we live in a society in which prejudice exists —we must counteract it – or we support it through our silence. Even if prejudices are not present in a specific work setting, that doesn't mean that they don't exist. Like it or not, we can't sweep these unfortunate truths under the rug.

❖ **REALLY listen.** Taking the time to listen with genuine concern and compassion is an important step. Seeking understanding is a close second. Approaching communication with curiosity about other points of view helps individuals to feel valued, even if you don't agree with them.

❖ **Practice sensitivity.** Regardless what you learn about another person, the point is that exposing yourself to different opinions and values will go a long way toward overcoming any prejudices or misunderstandings that you may have. Put another way, learn, don't assume!

❖ **It cannot be overstated: Don't assume.** Because prejudice is often the result of a lack of information, it's crucial to not assume. Take the time to learn the beliefs, values, and practices of a race, culture, sexual orientation, or other minority group.

❖ **Don't tolerate prejudicial behavior.** Employees need to stand up to peers who use racial or other put-downs, even if they don't mean anything by them. For example, an employee might respond to his or her use of a sexual joke by saying something like, "Aw, you know I didn't mean anything by it!" Is this, in fact the case – or is it possible that this person secretly harbors some sort of prejudice, even if he/she doesn't realize it? Employees must admit to their own misgivings, find a good listener (not a person in that particular minority group) and determine the real reasons behind the behavior.

❖ **Recognize and appreciate each other's differences.** While it's important for managers and supervisors to treat their employees fairly – they needn't take this so far that they, in essence, "pretend" that racial, cultural, sexual orientation, and other differences don't exist. Acknowledge that people are, in fact, different. The EA professional can play a pivotal role in addressing the barriers that may be preventing an employee of a given minority, from seeking employee services.

Summary

Addressing prejudicial barriers – regardless of the minority group – demands an approach in which knowledge, not assumptions, becomes the norm. ■

Source: "Achieving Cultural Competence" by the Administration on Aging.