

Taking PRIDE in Your Work: Understanding Effective LGBTQIA+ Ally Training

Introduction

Support for the LGBTQIA+ community has increased greatly over the last several years. However, these individuals are still subject to workplace discrimination. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was established to protect minorities in the workplace, mainly based on race, sex, and religion. These protections do not extend to members of the LGBTQIA+ community, so they are not legally protected from discrimination in the workplace (Harrison, 2019, p. 92).

Minority stress theory asserts that socially marginalized groups, including sexual minorities, can experience mental and physical health problems resulting from negative social environments created by stigma, prejudice, and discrimination (Silverschanz, Cortina, Konik & Magley, 2009, p. 179).

Individuals within the LGBTQIA+ communities have an increased risk for mental health concerns, such as depression and substance abuse (Plöderl & Tremblay, 2015, p. 367). Adults who are LGBTQIA+ are more likely to experience suicidal ideation and eating disorders than adults who are heterosexuals (Committee on LGBT Health Issues and Research Gaps and Opportunities, 2011).

It is clear that there is a need for more education and training for how to handle issues specific to the LGBTQIA+ community, whether it is in school, the workplace, or society. To resist the stigma and marginalization experienced, organizations have developed across the

United States that specialize in providing open and affirming services to LGBTQIA+ individuals (Moe & Sparkman, 2015, p. 351).

With the social climate today, "it appears crucial to provide training...to develop counseling competency in working with individuals who are LGBT" (Lloren, 2016). Because of this, many businesses, schools, and other organizations hold ally trainings in order to minimize discrimination, increase support, and improve overall well-being.

Many companies have diversity training programs, but not all of them are well equipped to teach about the LGBTQIA+ community. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how to effectively hold ally trainings for local small business owners in Northern Utah, and how to motivate small businesses to hold these trainings.

Decrease in Discrimination

In the United States "findings indicate that between 15 and 66% of gay men, lesbian, and bisexual employees have experienced sexual orientation discrimination at work" (Lloren, 2016, p.290). Discrimination can come from co-workers, superiors, or employees. There are two basic forms of discrimination: formal discrimination and informal discrimination. Formal discrimination is seen in "contexts, such as job applications, interviews, promotion, wages, and dismissal," whereas informal discrimination is defined as "discriminatory incidents on an interpersonal level and may relate to malicious jokes, snubs, exclusion, or harassment" (Lloren, 2016, p.290).

Most forms of discrimination are done unknowingly, but are the result of a lack of knowledge about the LGBTQIA+ community and its members. While many businesses and organizations have developed "considerable awareness concerning sex discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual attraction" Buddel found that "awareness around sexual orientation and gender identity is significantly lower" (2011, p.141). It is important for companies to have LGBTQIA+-affirming policies to protect them legally. Policies in employment nondiscrimination "can buffer the effects of discrimination" within the workplace (Gower, 2019, p.317).

If an employee is dealing with discrimination, they will more than likely become less productive at work. The feelings and practices of discrimination can lead to employees within the queer umbrella to experience "disengagement from the workplace" (Buddel, 2011, p.135). It also discourages LGBTQIA+ members from advancing in the workplace or connecting on deeper levels with their peers. According to Buddel, "gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals remain subjected to many stereotypes and experience negative consequences" which can include "significant obstacles that inhibit opportunities and participation in the workplace" (2011, p.131). While discrimination plays a big role in an individual's willingness to engage in the workplace, their feelings of support and safety from their community have a strong influence on their commitment to their job.

Creates Social Support

Social support can be shown in a variety of ways. When members of the queer community feel supported within an environment, they are comfortable being their authentic selves. This includes an individual's willingness to 'come out' with members of the workplace. For the purposes of this paper, the term "coming out" will be referred to as disclosing. Disclosure is not a one-time occurrence. Because it happens multiple times and within a variety of degrees, it is thought of as an "ongoing process that occurs on a continuum" (Lloren, 2016, p.290).

Disclosure is an important process for LGBTQIA+ individuals. Even though it is important, most individuals do not feel the support needed to disclose with their peers at work. Studies indicate that "the majority of LGB employees do not disclose their sexual identity at work" (Lloren, 2016, p.290). This is due to the lack of support that these individuals feel within the workplace. Findings did indicate that having workplace nondiscrimination policies and less internalized homophobia did have a strong, positive correlation with how much an individual will disclose to others at work. Internalized homophobia refers to "the negative feelings or even self-hate that results from growing up in a heterosexist environment that devalues and denigrates nonheterosexuals" (Rostosky, 2002, p.412). This type of environment causes what is known as sexuality stress.

Sexuality stress is the stress caused by rejection, victimization, internalized shame, or vigilance that comes from one's hidden sexual identity. LGBTQIA+ members have "a need for support in

coping with sexuality challenges" (Doty, 2010, p.1134). The workplace is a common space for individuals to seek guidance and support. Members of the queer community seek the same validation that their heterosexual and cisgender peers receive freely in this space. It was found that "professional support for sexuality stress was less available than support for other stressors" (Doty, 2010, p.1134).

Sexuality support is a crucial component to an individual's willingness to fully disclose. It thrives in spaces where internalized homophobia and sexual discrimination are not prevalent. Several factors may limit the availability of sexuality support, including "negative attitudes towards sexual minorities, others' lack of knowledge about sexuality related issues, and the individuals own discomfort in seeking sexuality related support" (Doty, 2010, p.1136).

Another reason sexuality support may be lacking in the workplace is that LGBTQIA+ individuals experience unproductive feedback from peers when they seek assistance. There are two typical responses from coworkers when LGBTQIA+ peers seek support: blaming responses, in which the LGBTQIA+ individual is blamed for the outcome; and minimizing responses, in which the significance of the event is downplayed. Both of these responses are counterproductive. "While blaming GLB individuals for the negative outcomes is inhumane, minimizing responses are significantly associated with increasing psychological distress" (Buddel, 2011, p.135). Social support is vital to the disclosure process. Lloren found that "disclosure is expected to increase psychological well-being and positive work attitudes" (2016, p.291).

Improves Psychological Health and Well-Being

Members of the LGBTQIA+ community have “unique environmental and personal challenges that influence their identity development and socialization process” (Rostosky, 2002, p.412). Because of this, businesses and organizations have attempted to implement policies and practices in order to be a positive aspect in the individual’s development.

There have been many findings about the benefits that companies receive when they keep their employees satisfied. Most employees that have positive psychological health are more organized, engaged, and efficient at their job. According to the Wall Street Journal, LGBTQIA+ workers who feel respected and satisfied at work “tend to stay in their jobs longer” and are also “more likely to call on their diverse networks to bring in new clients” (Weber, 2013, p.8). Ultimately, psychological health and well-being are shown to be crucial aspects of an individual’s feelings of fulfillment and commitment at work.

Positive psychological health in the workplace is found to be extremely sought after among employees. The most productive way to improve the well-being of queer individuals in the workplace requires “an understanding of how social environments can support them” (Gower, 2019, p.314). Not all in-staff employees have the expertise to do this adequately, which is why many of the businesses and organizations that hold a form of ally training hire an outside source.

Employers need to create supportive and engaging environments for all of their employees and associates. Participating in ally trainings help them to do this in a respectful way by “encouraging employers to

foster expansive learning as a means of promoting full participation for GLB individuals in the workplace” (Buddel, 2011, p.131). There have been inconsistent findings on whether or not ally trainings actually help. However, several studies have found that “both a supportive workplace climate and the implementation of LGBT supportive policies tend to improve the experience of homosexual and bisexual employees” (Lloren, 2016, p.291).

General support for the LGBTQIA+ community has increased drastically within the last decade; however, workplace education and discussion concerning the queer community has not increased at the same rate. Even though it is present in businesses, schools, and other organizations, “diversity management targeted toward LGBT employees remains, on average, rather low compared to other groups such as women or ethnic minorities” (Lloren, 2016, p.291).

When looking at ally trainings, one of the most discussed methods is expansive learning. This method encourages “workers to facilitate organizational learning and change through engagement with one another” (Buddel, 2011, p.139). Expansive learning is thought to be effective because it addresses and combats the unequal nature of the workplace. Fuller and Unwin’s expansive approach includes “collaboration among team members; opportunities to learn new skills...and gain a sense of belonging and engagement, particularly in the primary community of practice” (Buddel, 2011, p.140).

Fostering diversity and inclusion in the workplace has many benefits for both LGBTQIA+ individuals and their respective

organizations, but “must be facilitated in a very respectful and sensitive manner” (Buddel, 2011, p.141). To better understand how to motivate small businesses in northern Utah to participate in ally training, researchers asked the following questions:

RQ1: Why do small businesses participate in ally trainings?

RQ2: How best could the local PRIDE organization structure ally training?

RQ3: What are the most effective recruitment and public relations strategies for ally training?

Method

Researchers conducted a qualitative study in order to understand why local Northern Utah small businesses opted to participate in ally training. Two focus groups and four interviews were conducted. The researchers conducted focus groups and interviews with small business owners and employees in northern Utah. Focus groups and interviews were also conducted with professionals who had already undergone a form of ally training.

Participants who had completed ally trainings were asked questions about their experience and how effective they perceived it to be. Participants who had not completed or implemented an ally training were asked questions about their opinions on the trainings and whether or not they perceived them to be effective. Talking to employees in addition to the employers would be a way to get more realistic descriptions and a different point of view.

Participants were not given the questions in advance, so the answers given in the focus group could be more raw and unprepared. In total, there were eleven participants. Five participants were interviewed, and seven participants participated in two focus groups.

Researchers emailed local business owners and employees inquiring if they would be willing to participate. Participants that agreed were split into two groups, those who have participated in ally trainings, and those who have not.

Participants were informed of the purpose of the focus group, confidentiality, and their rights as it pertained to the group. Not all participants were given a confidentiality agreement, due to a lapse by the researchers.

At least three researchers were present during the focus groups and interviews. One facilitated the discussion, one observed the participants, and one recorded the session and took notes. Participants were made aware of the recording and transcribing before the focus group or interview took place.

Participants were encouraged to use first names while participating, yet they were aware they would remain confidential. Pseudonyms were used in the transcribing to ensure confidentiality. Researchers transcribed the conversation recorded within seven days of the completion of the focus group or interview. The findings of the focus groups and interviews are described below.

Findings

After conducting focus groups and interviews with both local business owners and university faculty, researchers compared responses to best understand the public's thoughts and understandings concerning ally trainings. Four themes emerged from the data: personal and cultural bias, information gap, validation of significance, and lack of allyship.

Themes were analyzed to best understand the perception of ally trainings and the motivation to participate in them. In order to maintain confidentiality, all participants names and places of work have been altered.

Personal and Cultural Bias

The interviews and focus groups revealed that there are many other misconceptions about not just the ally training, but also the LGBTQIA+ community. Many of these misconceptions have to do specifically with the audience receiving the information, and could cause issues down the road for the local PRIDE organization if they were trying to create a general training.

Many personal and cultural biases were brought to the surface concerning ally trainings and the LGBTQIA+ community as a whole. There was, however, one factor that steered them all. Religion was widely discussed during all conducted focus groups and interviews. It had a powerful cultural influence as the area was heavily Christian. Because of the strong and well-known disagreements between many Christian groups and the LGBTQIA+ community, many participants saw this as a reason to not participate in ally trainings.

Participants who identified as Christian continued to mention the fear of potentially offending employees or peers by mandating ally training. Amanda*, a staff member at a local university, expressed her own personal fears and biases because of her religious upbringing. She said, "I know that there are some people with similar backgrounds as me that are cautious [because they think], am I betraying my religion or am I crossing boundaries'," because she had participated in ally training (Focus Group 1, 2019, p.11). Many agreed with Amanda and explained how the Queer community was a highly controversial topic locally. Participants suggested that ally trainings should be paired with other sensitivity trainings in order to not draw too much attention and offend the religious cultural norm. By doing so, participants agreed that it would be more beneficial because it wouldn't make the majority of people uncomfortable (Miles, Focus Group 2, 2019, p.17).

Some participants expressed they think there is less discrimination than people think in the workplace, or at least there is in theirs. One of the members of the focus group for small business employees said "there's that sensitivity around being a little different sometimes that makes people assume things about why maybe, they didn't get a certain position or why they were treated a certain way when it really isn't about that" (Focus Group 2, 2019, p.9). Another member of the same focus group said "we've had the opposite where people assume that they're being discriminated against because of being a certain way, and it has nothing to do with that at all, and

*- Pseudonyms were used to participants to preserve anonymity and confidentiality

it's a very tricky situation to tread because of course you don't want to overstep in the other direction, but I think it's really easy to get in that mindset of like, oh my gosh, this is happening again without really meaning to" (Focus Group 2, 2019, p.10).

Along those same lines, some participants expressed concern about it being an uncomfortable topic to be trained on. One of the participants in the focus group with small business employees said this could be a controversial topic. They said "I think if you do a training completely by itself on this topic, it may feel like an abnormal amount of focus on it to where people feel uneasy" (Focus Group 2, 2019, p.17).

Another member of the same focus group said "there's got to be balance with it. Like if you come in hard and we're doing three hours of this, it's almost to the point where they focus so heavily on it that it seems odd. And it's not. It's not inclusive anymore. It's almost going in the other direction of ostracizing other groups or, or making it a bigger deal than it needs to be" (Focus Group 2, 2019, p.17).

Bias within the community has also brought up uncertainty of the relevance of ally training. While participants acknowledged the benefits of expanding awareness of the LGBTQIA+ community, many did not see the need to participate in trainings in order to execute their day-to-day tasks at work (Amanda, Focus Group 1, 2019, p.7). Because of this, ally trainings did not seem to hold immediate value to the community. Miles, a local business owner, said that amongst his employees, LGBTQIA+ issues have "never surfaced as a problem. So for

that reason, this wouldn't be something that needs to happen right away because we see no evidence that there's a problem," (Focus Group 2, 2019, p.13).

Validation of Significance

While the climate can create biases against ally trainings, many participants recognized that the climate can also create a need for them. There was an awareness that small, heavily religious communities can be closed minded and slow to change. Contradicting what was said before, it was found that individuals believed that spreading LGBTQIA+ support was significantly important.

One prevalent reason participant's found ally training to be useful was because it instigated a conversation about the LGBTQIA+ community that was not happening on its own. Jill, a restaurant franchise manager, explained the climate of the community:

We've been surrounded by the gay community our whole lives.

It's just that they were always kind of in hiding I guess you could say. It was never like a big deal. And now that it is, people just don't know what to do (Interview 1, 2019, p.2).

With the increasing LGBTQIA+ awareness, community members expressed a need to have conversations so as not to further alienate groups. While acknowledging that it may be uncomfortable, community members recognized a need to cultivate empathy for LGBTQIA+ individuals. Sarah, a local business owner, stated "I am very much a firm believer that you have to reach someone through their heart to change their mind," (Interview 3, 2019, p.20). One reason that

participants found ally trainings to be important was because they were beneficial in the workplace.

This, again, contradicts what was discussed earlier. While the religious bias influenced some participants to be against ally training, many others felt that the local businesses could benefit from the training as long as they were open to them.

Some businesses hold in-house ally trainings that employees say are extremely constructive. Kate, a local healthcare professional, discussed the importance of her company's ally program on customer experience as well as employee satisfaction. The employer's goal "was to teach their employees to be inclusive- that our conversation, our body language, whatever we do is to be done with respect," (Interview 2, 2019, p.5). Enabling discussions about inclusion and respect was found to be extremely valued because it created safe and serene spaces.

A comfortable workplace was desired among participants, and ally training was a way that many agreed created such an environment. Because of this, ally training was described as having both personal and professional value. One commonly agreed upon way that this training brought value was through increasing awareness on LGBTQIA+ community terminology, practices, and discrimination.

Awareness was a key component that was mentioned during the focus groups and interviews. Participants who had completed ally trainings were grateful to have more awareness of the queer community, and the participants who hadn't wanted to know more. It was discussed that awareness was the key thing that needed to be focused on because that

is what prompts change (Jane, Interview 3, 2019, p.3). While some community members were open to change, it was discovered that there was a clear information gap amongst various groups.

Information Gap

Miscommunication about the LGBTQIA+ community and their struggles, as well as fundamental terminology, causes information gaps that divide groups within the local community. As discussed earlier, this unawareness and divide created discomfort around speaking about the LGBTQIA+ community because individuals don't feel knowledgeable about the topic. Both participants who had and had not completed ally training expressed that there was an obvious information gap throughout the community. This was found to be especially true in correct terminology.

Using correct terminology is the simplest way to show effort and support, especially in the LGBTQIA+ community. It is, however, difficult to self-educate on correct terminology for the queer community because of how quickly it changes. Because of this, many do not feel comfortable discussing any LGBTQIA+ topics. Prior to ally training, participants were surprised by some of the LGBTQIA+ definitions and classifications. Kate stated that it was important for her and her colleagues to gain an understanding because healthcare professionals were having more interactions with "out" LGBTQIA+ individuals than in previous years. Therefore, knowing expectations on how to properly address them was crucial (Interview 2, 2019, p. 6). It was found that learning correct terminology was sought after by all participants who had completed some form of ally training.

Another corresponding factor to the information gap discussed in the research was the differing levels of understanding of the LGBTQIA+ community amongst participants. Individuals who had completed ally training discussed how trainings were not always productive because not all trainees were coming into them with the same base knowledge.

Emma, a staff member at the local university, stated "I think for me what's tricky about these type of trainings' is that you only have so much time with people and you have to assume everyone is at the 101 level," when the reality is that most sessions have individuals with different backgrounds on the subject (Focus Group 1, 2019, p.7). To combat this issue, participants who had completed ally trainings suggested that multiple classes be held that were designed for different groups of people in order to increase productivity. Participants discussed the issue that only certain community groups actively sought ally trainings, while a majority were unaware of them. Breaking up the general ally training into more specific sections was also discussed to help bridge the information gap amongst community groups. Ally-trained participants mentioned the importance to identify these subgroups that need the LGBTQIA+ trainings so that the local PRIDE organization can find ways to assign a value to them (Emma, Focus Group 1, 2019, p.12). This value is necessary in order to motivate participants to apply allyship into their personal and professional lives.

Lack of Allyship

Allyship is a lifelong process of building relationships based on trust, consistency, and accountability with marginalized individuals

or groups. Another common theme discussed by participants was the lack of true allyship. It should be an active and ongoing process; however, many participants felt that this was not the message given during ally trainings. This creates a lack of accountability within the community. One disconnected area that participants identified was the lack of further trainings or real-world application. Many believed that the trainings were marketed as a one-time seminar, and that the content wasn't teaching the advocacy skills needed to be an ally (Sarah, Interview 4, 2019, p. 17). Accountability is a crucial part of the allyship process. Without it, participants say that the trainings are unproductive and lack purpose.

Unproductive trainings left participants confused on how to apply being an LGBTQIA+ ally into their personal and professional lives. The goal of ally training is to instigate behavioral change; however, many participants expressed their concerns that the trainings were not currently run this way. It was agreed that there needed to be an emphasis on how to operationalize what participants have learned in the trainings and to provide a critical understanding of allyship (Emma, Focus Group 1, 2019, p.8). Participants believe that focusing the ally trainings on allyship rather than solely terminology and beginning topics would create a more authentic and beneficial program.

Limitations and Future Research

Due to time and resource restrictions, researchers were not able to solely interview local business owners. Staff from a local university were also interviewed in order to gather more data. Furthermore, all but one of the participants identified as Caucasian,

and all but two identified as female. This does not accurately represent the local business owner population of Northern Utah, making it impossible to draw statistical conclusions from the data collected. Further research could be done by the local PRIDE organization to better understand business owners' motivations to participate in or mandate ally trainings. Further research could also be done on sensitivity or informational trainings that local businesses hold for other workplace minority groups in Northern Utah to better understand the general climate for trainings' in small businesses.

Conclusions

The results of this study offer several important contributions for the literature. First, the findings show that personal and cultural biases in a community greatly affect an individual's willingness to participate in ally trainings. While participants contradict one another in their desire to participate or not, the communal biases caused individuals to feel strongly about their decision. This environment could make it difficult for organizations to gain new clients.

Second, the results of this research show that there are multiple information gaps among groups in the community. This includes gaps in base knowledge of individuals who participate in ally trainings, and gaps in which groups choose to participate in the trainings initially. This finding alone shows two core issues with the current ally training system; that the current training is not being taught in a way that optimizes multiple groups needs in a productive manner, and that new ways of marketing this service has not been explored.

Finally, lack of accountability creates a passive and uneducated allyship culture. The study showed that participants desire a program that is active and authentic. Such findings may be especially helpful to other local PRIDE organizations, as well as alternative minority training organizations. Overall, the findings of this research concluded that current ally trainings held by the local PRIDE organization, while facing a difficult social culture and bias, were valued and needed by the community.

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