

Issue #2. Managing a Gay Identity in the Workplace

A central career focus for gay persons is managing their sexual identity. Gays who are in the closet must deal with the stress of "living a lie," while gays who come out must deal with people's reactions, according to author R. Rich and others.

Gays in the Closet

As gay acceptance increases over time, they are more likely to come out of the closet. In 2011 about half, 48%, reported being closeted at work (Hewlett 2011), compared to the 1990s, when 76% of said that they concealed their sexual orientation at work (Senate 1994). Staying in the closet has huge consequences. Those who are out flourish at work, while those who are in the closet languish or leave.

Those in the closet must be constantly vigilant. They devote great energy to pretending they have a lifestyle they don't or avoiding the lifestyle issue altogether. The fear of disclosure is ever present, resulting in anxiety and stress. They report significantly greater feelings of being stalled in their careers and greater dissatisfaction with their rates of promotion and advancement. They are 40% less likely to trust their employer than those who are out, and 73% more likely to leave their companies within the next three years (Hewlett 2011).

Counterfeiting a Straight Identity

How do gay persons manage to stay in the closet without raising suspicion? Many create fictitious spouses or opposite-sex lovers. Some complain about their status as a confirmed single, as someone unlucky in love, as a man with an old war wound, or as a woman with an inconsolable broken heart from an early tragic love affair.

Some corporate cultures make being straight and "coupled" a prerequisite for acceptance and involvement. Invitations to business-related events include mates or dates. If gays accept these invitations, they must make up an excuse for not having a mate, or they must bring an opposite-sex friend to keep up the pretense. If they shun such events to avoid the discomfort, important career opportunities can be lost.

Gay pretenders often complain that their social lives don't reflect their inner reality. Not surprisingly, they feel they are treated as if they are "someone else." They pay the price of enormous wasted energy from the effort needed to keep up the pose and the anxiety over possible discovery. They also must cope with the ethical problems implicit in living a lie. Perhaps most crucial, they must deal with the feelings of isolation and detachment that result from not being "who you really are."

Dodging the Issue

Gay persons who evade the issue of gayness tend to avoid all discussions of sexuality and to insist that others respect their privacy. They withhold the sexual information that people usually exchange in conversations, information about wives and husbands, girlfriends and boyfriends. They try not to answer such personal questions without people *realizing* they're not answering. Strategies include changing the subject and asking the questioner a question, perhaps softening their evasions with humor.

They have no way of knowing what conclusions others have made about their avoidance of personal talk. They wonder, but never know, if others think they are gay. They may have no work-related social contact at all. Most eventually bump into a glass ceiling imposed by their social isolation. They just don't quite fit in with upper management.

Gays Who Come Out

Gays generally carefully calculate the risk before they come out at work. According to such authors as J.D. Woods and J.H. Lucas, when gay persons first come out, they

experience great relief but must immediately deal with antigay prejudice. They do find strategies for coping, and virtually all say that coming out is worth it (Neumann 2004).

Calculating the Risk

Coming out is anxiety filled and liberating at the same time. Gay persons say that when their sexual orientation is disclosed (whether by choice or because someone guessed it or told others), their first response is apprehension and anxiety about their job and the workplace. They don't believe being gay affects their work performance but that prejudice against them does. Most believe their career progression will be slowed or blocked. In fact, about one in three gay persons who have come out say they have experienced some form of job discrimination.

As the awareness and coming-out process unfold, gay persons' natural tendency is to want to end the deception. They calculate the probable effects of coming out on their job security. Those who are most likely to come out have one or more of the following factors that provide some security. They:

- are self-employed
- have professional credentials
- work directly with customers, so their dependence is dispersed across many persons outside the company
- hold jobs that have concrete measures of success
- have unique, irreplaceable skills that are needed by the company or within the industry

Facing the Reactions

The most immediate reactions gay persons face when they come out can include:

- becoming the target of verbal abuse and nonverbal hostility
- increased stress levels stemming from harassment
- a backlash of negative attitudes
- being fired or demoted
- being heaped with effusive sympathy and support

Professionals may find their effectiveness compromised and their authority undercut. Teachers often feel that they must always be on guard. For example, they may think twice before giving a student a hug and saying "Great job," because it could be misinterpreted. Over 40% of gay persons who have come out report anti-gay discrimination from co-workers (Peeples 1985).

In the long run, they must still spend much energy managing their gay identity, and most of them must also deal with being a token gay in a straight work group. The most important strategy gays adopt is to build a support network, although being gay makes this more of a challenge. Strategies for managing the fact that they are openly gay include minimizing their gayness, making it seem normal, and offering it as an asset to the firm.

Minimizing Gayness

Some minimize the visibility of their sexuality with the goal of lessening their vulnerability. They fear that if they become too visible, or if gay persons in the organization appear too numerous, they will trigger hostility. They say there is a big difference for most heterosexuals in knowing about a gay's sexuality and actually engaging in conversations on the subject, seeing them with a gay partner, and especially seeing them touching, dancing, or embracing. Therefore, most gay persons feel safer behind veiled comments and insinuations about their personal lives, as opposed to candid discussions.

Normalizing Gayness

Gayness is normal for more than 2% of the population, but most straight persons don't think of it as normal. Therefore, many gay persons use a strategy of subtly influencing others to see gayness as normal. They talk about their relationships and lifestyle in terms that highlight similarities to straight life, speaking of family, romance, and civil rights. They speak of many of the same concerns as co-workers, such as making house payments, dealing with "in-laws," or finding a date.

Their purpose is to transform the unusual into the commonplace and acceptable and to give co-workers a framework for thinking about gay lifestyles. In doing this, they get away from the focus on their "different" sexual orientation so that others may see the similarities between gay and straight relationships and relate to them as people first. Just like straight persons, gays know that beneath their sexual self is a core self that is more essential and encompassing, a more complete and complex self. They have the strong belief: "Whether I'm gay or not, I'm still *me*."

Making Gayness an Asset

A few gay persons are able to showcase their gayness as an advantage to the company. For example, they may highlight their multi-faceted connections with the gay community and marketplace and with talented professionals who might be recruited as employees, consultants, or suppliers.

Heaving a Sigh of Relief

Despite the hassles of discrimination virtually all gay males who have come out say they don't regret the decision. The most important result is an overwhelming sense of relief at being finally open, followed by reduced stress, enhanced self-image, and feelings of freedom. Gay persons who come out experience less anxiety and depression, have more positive self-concepts, and feel better able to fully experience their emotions and interests (Schmitt and Kurdek 1987; McDonald 1982).