

# Frequently Asked Questions by Managers Regarding GLBT Workplace Issues

*A guide for enabling safe and inclusive workplaces  
for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender employees*



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***GLBTworkplace.com***

## ***Why do I need to know that an employee of mine is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (GLBT)? Isn't this a personal matter that has nothing to do with work?***

In many regards, a person's sexual orientation or gender identity has nothing to do with their ability to do quality work. For this reason, their sexual orientation or gender identity should not be a factor in their performance reviews, job assignments, or promotion opportunities.

A certain level of personal interaction among employees is a natural part of every workplace. In fact, it's necessary to build cohesive teams. If a GLBT person feels (s)he must hide information about his/her identity, that person will expend needless energy to do so that detracts from the energy and focus (s)he could be devoting to his/her job. Even simple things that straight people take for granted, like putting a picture of their spouse on their desk or talking freely about what they did over the weekend, are problematic for GLBT people who do not feel they can be open about themselves at work. Most other people will detect that there are barriers to dealing with this person, which is awkward and uncomfortable for everyone.

Occasionally, business-related issues will arise where an employee's sexual orientation or gender identity is a relevant factor that should be communicated and honored. If you and the employee have already established a relationship of openness and trust, then these issues may be dealt with more easily when they arise. For example,

- Attending work activities in which spouses and/or families are invited
- Requesting time off to care for an ailing spouse
- Requesting bereavement leave for a spouse or a spouse's parent
- Relocations or temporary assignments
- Participation in a GLBT Employee Resource Group or conference
- Requesting help in dealing with a hostile or discriminatory situation at work

## ***If one of my GLBT employees "comes out" to me, what should I say in response?***

First, you should realize that it was probably an act of risk-taking and courage for the employee to share this information. The employee chose to place this trust in you in order to have a more open, honest relationship with you.

Start by thanking the employee for sharing this information with you. Assure the employee that if (s)he has any issues or concerns, (s)he should feel welcome to talk to you about them. Ask if the employee wishes to have this information remain confidential, or if (s)he wants to be out to others in the workplace. Ask if the employee has a spouse or significant other; if so, ask the spouse's name and remember it, as you would for a straight employee's spouse.

## ***What does "transgender" mean?***

Transgender is an umbrella term that describes anyone expressing characteristics that don't correspond with those traditionally ascribed to the person's gender or presumed gender; this includes transsexuals, cross-dressers, and many others. Gender identity is separate from sexual orientation; transition from one gender to another does not necessarily result in a change in one's sexual orientation.

One of my employees has just informed me that (s)he is transgender and is going to begin gender transition. What do I need to know? What do I tell my group?

First, meet with an HR representative. Ask if your employer has policies or guidelines for accommodating transgender people. If they do not, perhaps this will be the catalyst for your employer to create them. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) has an excellent publication called "Transgender Issues in the Workplace: A Tool for Managers" which is available at [www.hrc.org](http://www.hrc.org).

- Make a conscious effort to refer to a transgender person using the name and pronouns by which the person has indicated they wish to be called.
- Recognize that when a transgender person decides to transition from male to female or vice versa, it is a major life decision that is not entered into lightly, and impacts every aspect of the person's life.

- As in most cases when a person returns from surgery, understand that a transgender person may wish to have some privacy. If you would like to ask questions, start by asking if the person is willing to take questions. Ask questions in private, rather than in a crowded office space or cafeteria line.
- Some awkwardness, discomfort, and questions are to be expected when an employee transitions. It's better to raise issues or ask questions in a tactful manner than to allow uncertainties or negative feelings to lurk beneath the surface and remain unresolved.
- Most of all, transgender people want to feel safe and included and be treated the same as everybody else.

Regarding what to tell your group, a good approach is to have a department meeting, co-led by you and your HR representative, with the transgender person absent. Tell everyone else what is happening, and stress the following points:

- While the transgender person is changing his/her identity in a very obvious way, (s)he is still the same person inside, with the same skills and talents to contribute.
- The transgender person must be treated with the same respect and professional courtesy as any other employee. Tell the group the person's new name, and stress that the person should henceforth be called by his/her new name and the correct gender pronouns.
- Acknowledge that this is an unusual event that most people have probably never directly dealt with before. Allow them to ask questions, and answer them to the best of your ability.

Be aware that your employees will be watching how you handle the situation, and your approach to the situation will likely have a strong influence on how they handle situation.

***Isn't being GLBT just a lifestyle choice? Why should GLBT people receive the same protections as racial/ethnic minorities, women, etc.?***

While each person has his/her own story and opinion on this matter, the vast majority of GLBT people believe that they were born this way. For GLB people, their feelings of attraction to the same gender seem as natural to them as attraction to the opposite gender seems to straight people. For transgender people, the feeling that they should be a person of the opposite sex is compelling and persistent. The choice for GLBT people is whether to live their life honestly, in accordance with who they really are, or to attempt to suppress their true feelings and act as though they are heterosexual and/or comfortable with their gender identity.

***I suspect that an employee is gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Should I say anything?***

Not directly. However, you can say things to let the employee know that you are supportive of GLBT people. For example, when there is a news event or movie with gay subject matter, comment positively about it. If you have GLBT friends, mention that in conversation if an appropriate opportunity arises. If you hear inappropriate jokes or hostile remarks, speak up and address it promptly.

***What can I do to ensure that my workplace is a safe and welcoming place for GLBT people?***

- When you have discussions about workplace diversity, don't omit or gloss over sexual orientation and gender identity. Include them with the same weight that you give to other diverse characteristics such as sex, race, ethnicity, religion, age, disability, etc.
- Use "guest," which is more inclusive than terms such as husband/wife, spouse, partner, or significant other.
- Ensure that all employees feel welcome to participate in social activities such as lunches and happy hours.
- Speak up if you hear someone make an insensitive statement or joke. State publicly that such comments are inappropriate for the workplace. A GLBT person within earshot uses such moments to gauge how welcoming and safe his/her work environment is.

### ***What challenges might a GLBT employee face at work?***

- In many states, GLBT people can be fired simply on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Many GLBT people fear that their sexual orientation or gender identity could impede their performance evaluations and promotional opportunities.
- Many GLBT people may be shunned or excluded from everyday things that happen in the life of the workplace, like having lunch together or getting together after work.
- Many GLBT people fear being verbally or even physically attacked.
- Most GLBT people are constantly concerned about how much information about themselves they can safely share with others, especially in casual conversation.
- If your employer is multi-national, a GLBT person may be at high risk when traveling to many countries in which homosexuality is illegal and people are imprisoned simply for being GLBT. In some countries, simply being GLBT is a capital offense.

### ***What additional challenges might a transgender employee face at work?***

- Other employees might feel uncomfortable if a transgender person uses their restroom.
- Other employees may intentionally call the person by his/her former name and continue to use pre-transition gender pronouns.
- The transgender person may feel a tremendous sense of isolation and of being avoided by others.

### ***What are the laws concerning discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity?***

Currently, there is no federal law preventing employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. The Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) almost passed during the Clinton administration, but was narrowly defeated. This legislation has been introduced again in 2007 and may pass Congress, but whether President Bush will sign or veto it remains to be seen.

Currently, 18 states and some counties and cities have passed laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Only nine states have laws prohibiting discrimination based on gender identity. Since laws change frequently, please consult web sites such as [www.hrc.org](http://www.hrc.org) for the most current information. (Source: [www.hrc.org](http://www.hrc.org))

Many employers now include sexual orientation and (sometimes) gender identity in their non-discrimination policies and diversity training, but too many still do not. 431 companies in the Fortune 500 (86 percent) include sexual orientation in their non-discrimination policies as of the end of 2006. 122 Fortune 500 companies (24 percent) include gender identity/expression in their policies.

### ***Based on my religious beliefs and/or socio-political values, I believe homosexuality is immoral. Why should I be forced to deal with these issues?***

Of course, you have every right to your religious beliefs and political viewpoints, and to live your life according to your beliefs and values. However, you don't have the right to expect others to live by those beliefs or to treat them unfairly if their beliefs and values differ markedly from yours. Others feel as strongly about their religious beliefs and political viewpoints as you do about yours. (And yes, many GLBT people are very strong in their religious faith.)

Most employers recognize that it's in their best interest to hire and retain the best people they can for their skills and abilities, regardless of their religious beliefs or political views. As a manager, you have an obligation to follow your employer's policies and act in their best interests. It helps to understand that at the most basic level, we all want the same things: to have a rewarding and challenging career, earn a good living, be treated fairly, get along well with others, and be happy.

Outside of work, we all tend to associate with people who have values and views similar to ours. Work represents a great opportunity to be exposed to a wide variety of people and their respective beliefs and opinions. While we should never try to force our beliefs upon others, work can be a venue for learning more and developing an understanding of others.

Once you get to know GLBT people, you may discover that many commonly held beliefs about GLBT people are based upon misinformation, inaccurate stereotypes, and blatant falsehoods, and that they are really not much different from most other people.

***My employee's sexual orientation or gender identity is a source of discomfort or conflict among the other employees in my group. What can I do?***

There are several things you might consider:

- Have a discussion about diversity during a staff meeting. Include all forms of diversity in the discussion, giving equal weight to GLBT. You can include much of the information contained in this brochure. People will probably respond much more favorably to a discussion based on fairness, respect, inclusion for everyone and the best interests of your employer, rather than being told that they must act a certain way.
- Have diversity training as an intact team. Your employer may already have suitable courses in place. If you feel that your employer's training does not adequately address GLBT issues, consider looking externally for training, such as [GLBTworkplace.com](http://GLBTworkplace.com) or [outandequal.org](http://outandequal.org).
- If there's a GLBT employee resource group where you work, meet with leaders of that group and ask if they can send someone to talk to your group.

Remember that if you role model a respectful and inclusive attitude towards GLBT people (and all other diverse people, for that matter), many of your employees will follow suit.

***Sometimes I overhear employees making insensitive remarks or telling inappropriate jokes. What should I say or do, if anything?***

Speak up if you hear someone make an insensitive statement or joke. State publicly that such comments are inappropriate for the workplace. A GLBT person within earshot uses such moments to gauge how welcoming and safe his/her work environment is.

***My GLBT employee wants to form or participate in a GLBT employee resource group. Is there a business need for this? Is this just a social club?***

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), sometimes known as affinity groups, definitely fulfill a business need. A GLBT ERG offers the same benefits as an ERG formed around any other diverse characteristic, such as sex, race or ethnicity, nationality, faith, disability status, veteran status, parent status, etc. ERGs can contribute to your workplace in many ways, including:

- Giving employees a place to belong and a chance to build networks, ultimately improving retention
- Building greater awareness and appreciation of diversity through diversity celebrations, lunch-n-learn events, etc.
- Providing the employer with an avenue into their community for marketing, charitable contributions, supplier diversity and employee recruitment
- Providing a forum or resource to identify and resolve workplace issues and increase cultural competency
- Building a positive reputation for the company within the various diverse communities

***How can I learn more about GLBT people, issues and culture?***

- You can learn a great deal by visiting several internet sites on a periodic basis. For workplace issues, visit [www.GLBTworkplace.com](http://www.GLBTworkplace.com), [www.outandequal.org](http://www.outandequal.org), and [www.hrc.org](http://www.hrc.org). For news and cultural awareness, visit [www.365gay.com](http://www.365gay.com) and [www.advocate.com](http://www.advocate.com).
- If your employer has a GLBT Employee Resource Group, join it! ERGs are almost always open to all employees. Your GLBT ERG will be thrilled to welcome a straight ally!
- Attend the annual Out & Equal Workplace Summit (see [www.outandequal.org](http://www.outandequal.org)).
- Simply get to know some GLBT people. It's easy – start with lunch!

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