

IN THIS ARTICLE

*Workforce Diversity, Sexual Orientation,
Special Workforce Populations,
Employee Attitudes*

Unlocking the Corporate Closet



BY JAY H. LUCAS AND MARK G. KAPLAN

**HUMAN RESOURCE PRACTITIONERS
ARE HAVING TO DEAL WITH THE ISSUE OF
EMPLOYEES' SEXUAL ORIENTATION.
THE KEY TO HANDLING THIS SENSITIVE
SUBJECT IS TO PRESENT IT AS PART OF
ONGOING DIVERSITY EFFORTS.**

HERE'S HOW.

As a human resource manager, you may feel uncomfortable about dealing with employees' sexual orientation as part of workforce diversity. Coming to terms with this emotionally charged issue isn't easy.

Many HR managers ignore the issues that affect gay men and lesbians in the workplace, to avoid resistance from other managers and employees and also because they lack education about such issues. Consequently, HR policy decisions regarding homosexual employees may be based on stereotypes and misinformation. In such cases, a significant segment of the workforce—gay men and lesbians—becomes the object of discrimination.

How can you help make sexual orientation a valued aspect of workplace diversity? How can you keep the issue of sexual orientation on the table in discussions of employee policies and benefits?

One way is to integrate sexual orientation into ongoing diversity efforts, telling people that the reasons for valuing gay and lesbian employees are basically the same reasons for valuing women, religious minorities, and people of color in the workplace: so that all employees can contribute to their fullest potential, unhampered by

prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination.

The key is to present sexual-orientation issues in the context of three *P*s: presence, policy, and productivity. By emphasizing those key areas, you can keep discussions focused on the business implications of a diverse workforce rather than on people's emotions about homosexuality.

"Presence" makes it clear that gay and lesbian people do work in the organization. "Policy" involves reviewing organizational nondiscrimination policies as well as state and local laws that affect the workplace. "Productivity" emphasizes financial results and a discrimination-free, harassment-free workplace.

Barriers to understanding

Even when the issue of sexual orientation is presented in the context of diversity, resistance from some employees may arise for various reasons.

For example, many people believe that homosexuality is a matter of choice. The source of their resistance may be that they believe that gay men and lesbians could choose to be heterosexual if they wanted to.

One might ask why anyone would choose a sexual orientation that carries a stigma and creates challenges in almost all aspects of life, including friends, family, and work. The idea that homosexuals choose to be homosexual implies that heterosexuals also choose to be heterosexual. Typically, consciously making a choice isn't how people say they become aware of their sexual orientation. In fact, recent studies suggest that sexual orientation may have genetic roots.

It's unlikely that the debate about choice can be resolved in a corporate environment. And it probably shouldn't be. Does it really matter whether gay men and lesbians have chosen their sexual orientation? They are present in the workforce, they can contribute to a company's productivity, and policies and laws govern the way they're treated in the workplace.

Resistance also may arise when people confuse sexual activity with

sexual orientation. Some people think that when gay men and lesbians talk about their weekend activities with their partners, they are flaunting their sexuality. But a gay man who talks about weekend plans that include his partner isn't flaunting

his sexuality any more than is a heterosexual, married man who discusses his weekend plans that include his wife. Resistance also occurs when people give religious beliefs as the reason for discriminating against gay men and lesbians. Companies can't

dictate employees' beliefs, but they can dictate acceptable behavior in the workplace. Rather than debating religious views, it is more helpful to ask how people's beliefs may affect their behavior at work toward homosexual employees.

It's important to challenge people's discriminatory behaviors. One way is to compare the discriminatory behavior to acceptable behavior for people who believe, for example, that women belong at home. Point out that such views don't excuse gender discrimination in the workplace. Similarly, prejudice against homosexuality doesn't excuse discrimination against gay men and lesbians.

Overall, participants should have the opportunity to express their religious beliefs. Acknowledge the diversity of such beliefs, and direct discussions back to actual behavior and the business issues of presence, policy, and productivity.

Coping strategies

A traditional approach to understanding a segment of the workforce involves going to the members of that segment to gather information and look for patterns of discrimination. But the fact that many gay men and lesbians in the workplace are "in the closet"—not open about their own sexual orientation—makes such an approach difficult.

Estimates about the percentage of homosexuals in the population in the United States range

from 10 percent for gay men and 5 percent for lesbians (according to Alfred Kinsey's studies in 1948), to 2.5 percent for gay men and 0.8 percent for lesbians (including bisexuals) in a 1988-91 study by the National Opinion Research Center and National Science Foundation.

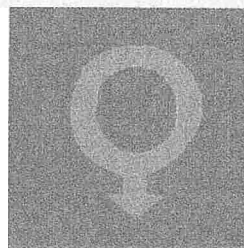
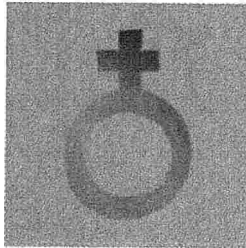
Typically, only a small number of workers in a given organization are openly gay or lesbian. Many homosexuals get the message that disclosure could result in discrimination and damage to their careers. They keep their sexual orientations secret because their organizations tell them—either subtly or not so subtly—that exposure carries high risks.

Some of the messages that keep people closeted come from society as a whole, though many homosexuals have "come out"—revealed their sexual orientation—in every aspect of their lives except work. It's important to understand how organizations sometimes create "lose-lose" situations for employees and the company, forcing gay and lesbian employees to choose from limited options:

Staying in the closet. This option is a strategy for hiding. Closeted employees may feel they have no choice but to avoid talking about their personal lives at work, for fear of saying something that will give them away. They often experience the ethical dilemma of having to lie to protect themselves, which can cause psychological stress. They can be so distracted that their job productivity suffers.

Coming out. Gay and lesbian employees who choose to "come out" and be integrated with heterosexual employees tend to reveal their sexual orientation in the same ways that heterosexual people do, by talking freely about their partners, personal plans, and so forth. After coming out at work, many gay men and lesbians say they feel empowered, honest, valued, and connected. Yet, this option is not without risks.

By coming out, gay and lesbian employees may be jeopardizing whatever credibility and influence they've built at work. No matter how competent and skilled



they are, they fear they may be devalued by their managers and co-workers once their sexual orientation is known.

Avoiding the issue. This option is an in-between strategy. Fearing discovery, homosexual employees who avoid dealing with the issue tend to become vague, distant professionals who isolate themselves from close relationships with co-workers, team members, and mentors.

Avoiders tend to be aloof at work. They steer clear of situations in which they might reveal the everyday information people typically share with co-workers. If they do participate in informal discussions, they try to direct attention away from themselves.

Faced with those options and the inherent risks, many gay men and lesbians remain invisible in the workplace. To make the workplace as nonthreatening for them as for heterosexual employees, HR practitioners need to educate themselves about issues of sexual orientation.

Learning more

It's important to gather information about the experiences of gay men and lesbians in one's own organization and in competing organizations. But getting information can be difficult, even in firms with nondiscrimination policies. Many gay men and lesbians think that such policies alone don't offer adequate protection, so they hide their homosexuality.

Information that is available may be inaccurate. Employee surveys may include questions about sexual orientation, but many gay and lesbian employees don't respond. In such cases, the data are skewed to the opinions of respondents who were willing to risk discovery by answering the questions.

Employee surveys that aim to gather information about an organization's gay and lesbian employees should include questions that enable such employees to identify themselves as gay or lesbian, describe their experiences as members of a minority in the company, and give their perceptions of what others think about their sexual orientation.

Survey questions specifically directed to gay and lesbian employ-



Survey Questions

Here are some relevant questions to include in a survey designed to get information about the experiences of gay and lesbian employees in an organization.

- ▶ Have you "come out" in order to bring a significant other to company events, change company policies, educate other employees, or improve relationships with bosses and co-workers?
- ▶ Have you stayed "in the closet" because of a fear of being fired or harassed, or because of unsympathetic bosses or co-workers?
- ▶ Do you think your supervisor's knowledge of your sexual orienta-

tion affects your chances of promotion or favorable job assignments?

- ▶ Did your sexual orientation influence your choice of career or organization?
- ▶ Does your sexual orientation create stressful situations at work?
- ▶ Has your sexual orientation affected your career success or ability to develop professional networks and contacts?
- ▶ Has your sexual orientation affected your ability to work as part of a team?
- ▶ Do you feel you've been discriminated against in your current job because of your sexual orientation?
- ▶ Do you know of openly gay men or lesbians at work?
- ▶ Do you think people at work care about other employees' sexual orientations?
- ▶ Do you think your work environment is accepting of gay and lesbian people?

ees can ask whether a respondent's co-workers and supervisor know the respondent's sexual orientation and how they've reacted to learning that the respondent is gay or lesbian. (See the box.)

External surveys should ask about incidents of discrimination against gay and lesbian employees and about nondiscrimination policies, awareness training, and domestic-partner benefits in other organizations, focusing on competitors that are in the same industry and that compete for the same labor pool.

In some instances, policy changes are happening so quickly that many senior-level managers aren't aware of their legal obligations. At least eight states and more than 80 localities now provide employment protection for gays and lesbians, covering 50 million people.

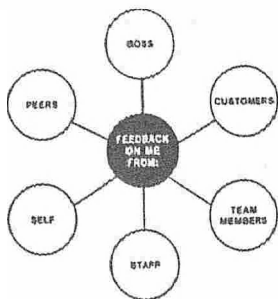
Another way to get information is to tap into informal networks for gay and lesbian employees. More than 30 major companies in the United States—including Xerox, AT&T, Eastman Kodak, and Apple—have such networks. Often, the members discuss sexual-orientation issues with top-level managers. Through net-

works, companies can identify people who might be willing to participate in focus groups or provide testimonials about their experiences as members of a minority in the company. Keep in mind that only people who are willing to risk being "out" may agree to participate, even when assured of confidentiality.

A less formal approach to gathering information is to take advantage of opportunities to discuss sexual-orientation issues whenever they arise. But it's more effective to challenge organizations to address the issue of sexual orientation directly. Here are several suggestions.

- ▶ Distribute copies of an article such as "Gay in Corporate America" (*Fortune*, December 16, 1991), and ask for feedback, including a written analysis of the implications in the context of the organization's culture. Written responses make it harder for resistant employees to dismiss the issue and also tend to reveal any vague, specious, and discriminatory responses.
- ▶ Include questions about sexual-orientation issues in diversity audits as well as employee surveys.
- ▶ Determine the likely number of

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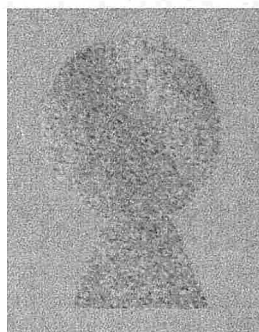
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gay and lesbian employees in the organization, using available figures about the percentage of homosexuals in society. Some gay and lesbian coalitions may be able to provide other data. An estimate gives discussion participants a sense of how many employees might be affected and provides a comparison to other minority groups in the workplace.

▶ Include sexual orientation as an aspect of other diversity interventions. Bring up sexual orientation whenever the issues of race and gender arise.

▶ Require that HR staff, diversity task forces, and other people responsible for designing and implementing



THE CHALLENGE IS IN FINDING WAYS TO CREATE AN OPEN CLIMATE

diversity programs be up-to-date on sexual-orientation issues.

▶ Report the results of information gathering to senior managers as part of an annual employee survey or through focus groups that also address other kinds of discrimination.

In addition, encourage senior executives to get involved so that they won't feel blindsided if called on to discuss relevant employee policies. One way is to provide senior and line managers with a half-day workshop on sexual orientation as an aspect of workforce diversity or on homophobia in the workplace.

If the issue of sexual orientation surfaces in the context of gay bashing, ask frank questions that get to the heart of the matter. Point out that

the productivity of all employees can be adversely affected by homophobia and "heterosexism," a belief that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality and that everyone is or should be heterosexual.

If the issue comes up in human resource and diversity meetings and makes people uncomfortable, call on a facilitator to create a safe environment for participants to express their views. Give participants a chance to learn from their discomfort, examine their own beliefs, and get accurate information.

Once an organization acknowledges the value of its gay and lesbian employees, the challenge is in finding ways to create a more open climate. The key to unlocking the corporate closet is to end the cycle of silence, secrecy, and invisibility that many homosexuals and heterosexuals support, either knowingly or unknowingly. Just talking about the issue is a valuable first step.

An organization that wants to acknowledge, keep, and benefit from gay and lesbian employees has to defuse the myth that they don't exist, and it has to eliminate hostility toward them. Gay and lesbian employees need to believe that they'll receive promotions and be given opportunities based on their skills and efforts. They need to believe that they can develop credibility, influence, mentoring relationships, and personal networks at work.

It stands to reason that people who don't have to fear discrimination are likely to be more productive in their jobs. And, in the current competitive environment for human resources, no organization can afford to chase away competent workers. As the gay rights movement says, it's a simple matter of justice. ■

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