

# SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN THE WORKPLACE

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*"Appreciating a diverse culture requires more than just not making inappropriate jokes. It also means using inclusive language. The politically correct terminology is gay, lesbian and bisexual (and transgendered) , even though the word gay, according to the dictionary, includes all homosexuals."*

Rita Risser, JD, CSP

"The New Diversity," Professional Speaker magazine 1996

"I can understand the need to respect people of different ethnic groups, ages, religion and gender. I don't understand why I should respect sexual orientation, since it goes against my beliefs?" Businesses who embark upon launching diversity initiatives often struggle with the issue of sexual orientation in the workplace. Frequently leadership itself has no acceptable response to the above comment, which is made by many employees.

Neither the government nor businesses expect workers to change their beliefs or values as it relates to sexual orientation or any other difference among people at work. However, it is expected that all employees will be held accountable for their own behavior. When GLBT \* (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered) jokes, gestures, and rumors are tolerated at work, it creates an environment that negatively affects productivity even if there are no GLBT's present. Such behavior can also be offensive to heterosexuals who are not biased in this way, and many workers who have friends and relatives who are other than heterosexual.

Each time people say something inappropriate they run the risk of making the company liable. One of my clients learned first hand what this means. Luckily they responded appropriately in the eyes of the EEOC, thus avoiding an extensive investigation and negative press.

A new employee had been hired. Soon thereafter, a peer worker started a rumor about the "new guy." Several people heard the rumor about his perceived sexuality, including the new employee. He filed a claim with the EEOC, charging the company of tolerating a "hostile environment." I had begun diversity awareness training for all employees and managers several months before this claim, and had instructed management on how to handle such situations. They made it clear to everyone that such behavior would not be tolerated, and repeated inappropriate behavior would be grounds for termination. Because the company was able to prove they were in the process of delivering diversity awareness training to everyone, and they had documented who they had spoken to and what was said to the offending employees, the EEOC dropped the claim.

The bottom line is this. Whether an employee is GLBT or straight she or he has the right to earn a living in a non-hostile environment. The more heterosexuals are able to recognize the double standard imposed on people who are other than heterosexual, the sooner those standards can be removed and everyone can focus on getting the job done.

The government is an excellent example of what not to do, in its efforts to treat people fairly. It says, "Don't ask, don't tell." If you are straight, imagine how much energy it would take to work for eight or more hours a day when you are compelled to hide your sexuality. That is what this rule requires. As busy as everyone is at work, people do not sit around talking about their social life, however the subject does come up occasionally. Think about what you would say when someone asks, "So what did you do for Memorial Day?" If you had to live by the "Don't ask, don't tell" rule, you would not be able to refer to your loved one as your wife, husband, boyfriend, or girlfriend. You might feel compelled to avoid answering the question, or lie. Neither are good alternatives when talking to people with whom you need to develop a trusting work relationship.

People fear that which they do not understand. This ignorance leads to the perpetuation of irrational beliefs and stereotyping. During my seminars, often individuals say that they are afraid that a gay person will try to "pick them up" or that all GLBT's want to do is talk about sex. GLBT's do not think about sex any more often than straight people do. "Hitting on" someone at work is inappropriate behavior, and management would be expected to take appropriate actions whether the offender was GLBT or straight. If GLBT people were interested in other GLBT people, why would they waste their time trying to develop a romantic relationship with someone who is straight? Fears are often illogical.

Many people use their religion as the reason to be bigoted toward those who are different. I am not an authority on religion, so let's just examine logic again. Most if not all religions teach some version of the "Golden Rule". Most if not all teach some variation of "Love thy neighbor." If one expects this as a value to be practiced, how can harassing, beating, and discriminating against a person solely based on sexual orientation be tolerated and condoned?

Regardless of religious beliefs, the reality is that GLBT's are in the workplace and in the marketplace. Each time prejudice is tolerated the business runs the risk of litigation, lost business, and a lost opportunity to attract and retain the best talent for the job, regardless of sexual orientation.

The following suggestions and resources may help you and your work colleagues learn more about this issue. By developing a deeper understanding of people who are different you will become better equipped to say the right thing at the right time to stop the perpetuation of biased and prejudiced behavior.

Make a commitment to do at least one of the following:

- a) Write down the reasons you think you are or would be uncomfortable working with a person whose sexuality is different from yours.
- b) Talk to your religious or spiritual leader about this issue. Be willing to seek clarity regarding contradictions you perceive about behavior and your faith's teachings.
- c) Have the courage to talk to someone whose sexuality is different than your own. Inform the person that you want to learn and understand. Ask for permission to ask her or him a few questions. (Remember that the answers represent that person, not everyone in the group.)
- d) If your company has a support group for people who are other than heterosexual, attend a meeting.
- e) Visit "chat rooms" on the Internet, and ask questions about your fears and beliefs.

Whenever you find yourself wondering what a person's sexual orientation is, ask yourself what difference does it make as it relates to your interactions with them or with getting the job done.

When fears are confronted, they become much less of a threat. You will probably find that GLBT people are just people who have a different sexual orientation than your own. Otherwise they are just like everyone else.