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How 'Straight Ally' Programs Are Transforming The Workplace

There is still fear among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) employees about coming 'out' in the workplace. Research by LGBT leadership organization 'Out on the Street' found that more than a third of LGBT employees choose not to come out because they are nervous their good relationships with colleagues will change and a third fear that colleagues would treat them differently. One way of supporting LGBT employees to come 'out' in the workplace and create a supportive working culture is through 'Straight Ally' programs. These programs involve heterosexual men or women who are vocal in their support of LGBT employees and one of the most pioneering sectors in the use of Ally programs has been the financial services sector.

Picture the scene. You're a heterosexual male or female working in an investment bank and you overhear homophobia banter among your work colleagues. It may mark a turning point for you to decide to intervene in defense of your lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual colleagues in the workplace. The campaign group Stonewall would define your actions as that of a 'straight ally'. This term is used to describe heterosexual individuals who believe LGBT people should experience full equality in the workplace. Straight allies can be senior figures in an organization or from a more junior level.

Why are straight allies important in advancing the rights of the LGBT community in the workplace? In many workplaces, lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) employees still have negative

experiences at work due to their sexual orientation. The Centre for Talent Innovation's (CTI) 'Power of "Out" 2.0: LGBT in the workplace' report found that the LGB employees are 1.2 times more likely to be out at organizations where straight senior executives express their support publicly (47% versus 21%). Stonewall's 'Peak Performance' report reported that LGB employees who felt they could be open about their sexuality at work were more likely to enjoy going to work, felt able to be themselves and form honest relationships with their colleagues.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual people who don't feel able to be out at work often expend significant amounts of energy on concealing their sexual orientation in the workplace. New York University School of Law Professor Kenji Yoshino's in conjunction with Christie Smith, managing principal Deloitte at the Deloitte University Leadership Center for Inclusion, recently published a recent white paper "Uncovering Talent" which focused on the issue of 'covering' –the process through which individuals downplay their differences often at great cost to their sense of self. The research found that covering behaviors were widespread and costly to individuals and their organizations. "If a person has something about themselves they're hiding then they are wasting precious energy," explains Todd Sears, Founder of Out on the Street.

One of the first 'straight ally' programs in the financial services sector was in Goldman Sachs. Launched in 2008 as part of its Pride Month activities, the group began with a 'top down-bottom up' approach with the goal of engaging partners and managing directors as well as employees on the front lines to become allies. The leaders identified 20 senior-level executives representing every division of the firm to participate as formal allies. Each one would be a visible advocate for the network and for LGBT issues at the firm, promoting and participating in LGBT events and mentoring and sponsoring LGBT employees to achieve greater success on the job. At the same time, Goldman Sachs formally developed a diversity and inclusion training course called 'Out in the Open: Sexual Orientation in the Workplace' which aimed to help the larger Goldman Sachs community understand the experience of LGBT employees

and to guide appropriate behavior. The Ally program has been replicated globally in other regions including Hong Kong, London and Bangalore.

Senior leaders who become 'straight' allies can have a transformative effect on the workplace, remarks Sears. "I've heard from a number of straight allies that it's personally fulfilling for them and secondly, there is the education piece around it. They often say before I became an ally, I had no idea what the LGBT issues were. If you don't have senior leaders within your organization as straight allies, then the program will not work."

However, ally programs are only effective if there is buy-in from the senior leadership, argues Michelle Moon Lim, client account manager for campaign group Stonewall. "You need the senior leaders to lead by example and you need somebody who can run the logistics and maintain momentum around the program," she said. "You also need to enhance the business benefits of retention and recruitment and that if you want to get the best out of people, their performance will be higher."

Although the programs initially involved straight allies who were senior figures in the organization, this has evolved to include allies from the LGBT community, explains Sears. "They started out as straight ally programs as the LGBT community within the workplace needed to bring the straight community into the discussion. Since then, people have realized how important allies are and the conversation has expanded so it could be a gay, lesbian or transgender person who is an ally."

However, there can be a disparity in views between how the LGBT community views the role of straight allies and how straight allies regard their own role. The CTI report found that an LGBT employee regarded the number one role for a straight ally as supporting a co-worker coming out of the closet whereas this was ranked much lower by straight allies. "This is about 'active' versus 'passive'," says Sears. "A lot of what people do as allies is reactive, not pro-active. One of the parts of being an active ally would be taking about the fact that a straight ally has a gay brother or relative."

Although progress has been made in terms of full employment rights for LGBT employees in the workplace, the work is far from over, remarks Moon Lim. “We now need to change the hearts and minds of people. The majority of people spend their time at work and if they are not able to come out to their colleagues and clients, then our work continues.”

Sears agrees that more work needs to be done by organizations to advance LGBT rights in the workplace. “I think that as we go more global, ally programs are how we will get more LGBT acceptance. It’s safer and easier and secondly if you think of the number of people who care about the LGBT community then companies are only just starting to market what they are doing with their LGBT employees and this will speak to a more broad

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