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# **Additional Agents of Change in Promoting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Inclusiveness in Organizations**

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King and Cortina (2010) describe several ways in which organizations can promote equity in the workplace environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) employees. We commend the authors for promoting such inclusiveness and describing both the moral and fiscally responsible reasons for doing so. We are hopeful that employers will heed the valuable suggestions offered by King and Cortina and work to adopt formal policies that protect the rights of LGBT employees, launch diversity initiatives to make LGBT employees feel more accepted, and advocate on behalf of LGBT interests.

As King and Cortina mention, however, employers are not prescribed by law to adopt such policies or act on behalf of the best interests of their LGBT employees. And ultimately, some employers simply will not. What, then, can be done to work toward and achieve the same important outcomes? Are there other sources that also have the power to motivate LGBT inclusiveness and initiatives within organizations other than the employers themselves? We assert

that, indeed, there are other sources and that a consideration of them and their potential efforts and influences are worthy of comment. In this article, we describe two additional bodies that may be instrumental in creating (with or without support from organizations themselves) a more inclusive work environment for LGBT employees: LGBT employees themselves and non-LGBT employees who serve as “allies.”

## **LGBT Employees as Change Agents**

LGBT employees can act in powerful ways within their organizations to improve their own and other LGBT employees’ professional experiences. We argue that perhaps the single most influential action LGBT employees might consider in improving the climate for LGBT workers is to “come out” at work. We recognize that coming out (particularly in a relatively unsupportive environment) makes some employees vulnerable targets of discrimination and antipathy in the workplace (see Hebl, Law, & King, 2010; Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). We also recognize that the costs of coming out must certainly be weighed with the benefits and that coming out is a personal decision that each LGBT employee must make individually. However, coming out in the workplace may accomplish three

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tasks central to promoting LGBT inclusiveness. Specifically, we argue that coming out may (a) increase LGBT visibility within an organization, (b) relieve LGBT employees' intrapersonal tensions, and (c) enhance intergroup interactions within the workplace.

First, by coming out in the workplace, LGBT employees are signaling to their employees and coworkers that such minority workers actually exist in the workplace. A common response to the question of why formal policies are not in place is a belief that such employees do not exist within one's organization (i.e., "we don't have to worry about that here, there aren't any of those people working at this company"). Thus, coming out at work, at the very least, raises awareness that there *are* LGBT employees within the organization. Employees who come out may further inspire other employees to likewise come out, thereby setting in motion the possibility of creating a critical mass as well as support groups. Similarly, the presence of "out" LGBT employees may reduce other coworkers' (who are also LGBT) feelings of isolation and be vehicles of change for the creation of inclusive climates. That is, when there are enough LGBT employees and they have adequate resources and power, they may be able to usher in large-scope organizational changes.

Second, coming out in the workplace is linked to many positive outcomes for those who are LGBT. For example, those who disclose may prevent the negative effects on mental health that are associated with managing a secret identity (Fassinger, 1996; Smart & Wegner, 2000). In addition, coming out in the workplace is positively associated with higher levels of job satisfaction and affective commitment, and lower levels of job anxiety, role conflict, role ambiguity, and work-family conflict (Day & Schoenrade, 1997; Griffith & Hebl, 2002). Furthermore, coming out in the workplace can extinguish the personal stresses and "identity disconnects" that occur when LGBT individuals are "out" in their personal lives

but remain closeted in their professional lives (Ragins, 2008).

It is important to note that many of the intrapsychic benefits of coming out are mediated by coworkers' positive reactions to the disclosures (Griffith & Hebl, 2002); thus, it is critical for LGBT employees to give some consideration to whom they initially disclose. The more positive their initial disclosures are, the more likely they might be to continue disclosing to other coworkers. Similarly, recent research shows that *when* and *how* LGBT individuals disclose can strongly influence how they are received. For instance, King, Reilly, and Hebl (2008) found that acknowledging one's sexual orientation in the workplace too quickly and in a very direct manner is often negatively perceived by others (see also Chrobot-Mason, Button, & DiClementi, 2004; Ragins, 2006).

Third, coming out in the workplace may ease the tensions that LGBT employees experience with heterosexual colleagues who initially may be unsupportive and prejudiced. Workplace interactions between LGBT employees (who make their sexual orientations known) and heterosexual employees produce situations that may enable them to identify commonalities, foster working and social relationships, and individuate each other beyond mere category labels (i.e., moving from, "That's the gay employee" to "That's John, who likes hiking in his spare time and has a really smart partner, Jim"). Such positive outcomes are predicted based on contact theory (Allport, 1954) and supported empirically by a recent meta-analysis that reveals that interactions involving heterosexual and gay and lesbian intergroup members are among the most successful in reducing prejudice and discrimination (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

### **Non-LGBT Employees as Change Agents**

Heterosexual individuals who are accepting and supportive of gays and lesbians, often called "allies," can also contribute to a more inclusive work environment. The

culture and climate of an organization is determined in part by the social norms of the individuals working there. Thus, creating an environment that is inclusive often requires that the individuals within the organization understand that prejudices and discriminatory behaviors are not socially accepted by the majority of employees. Although these norms can be established formally by the organization (as outlined in King and Cortina, 2010), they can also be established by individuals. Recent research has shown just how effective individuals can be in influencing their peers to express inclusive beliefs. For instance, Zitek and Hebl (2007) found that modeling positive attitudes toward gay individuals leads others to similarly model such positive attitudes. Hence, allies within organizations who openly support LGBT policies model norms for others and may be particularly effective when others do not have strong LGBT-related beliefs (see Zitek & Hebl, 2007). When such norms are developed or are already in place, allies can further influence others to adopt inclusive LGBT-related attitudes and behaviors by making these norms very salient (see Monteith, Deneen, & Tooman, 1996).

In addition to modeling and reinforcing inclusiveness, allies can have a profound effect on their LGBT coworkers simply by helping to create a “safe space” and/or by coming out themselves as an ally (i.e., posting an ally sticker in one’s workspace). In creating a safe space, allies’ simple acceptance of their LGBT coworkers has been linked to more favorable workplace outcomes for LGBT employees (Griffith & Hebl, 2002). Allies can also act in the best interests of their LGBT coworkers by avoiding heteronormative language and not making assumptions about any coworkers’ sexual orientations. In a qualitative study conducted by Brooks and Edwards (2009), LGBT employees noted that they most wanted from workplace allies the elements of inclusion, safety, and equity. Brooks and Edwards found that allies offered these elements by providing interpersonal support, speaking out against prejudiced

language, and confronting discrimination (see also Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Huffman et al., 2008). Not only do proactive behaviors on the part of an ally reinforce LGBT coworkers, but such allies may also compel organizations to adopt the initiatives and policies outlined in King and Cortina.

In sum, we agree with King and Cortina’s assertion that organizations should adopt policies and practices that support LGBT employees. In absence or combination with the work of organizations, we also believe that individuals (LGBT employees and allies) have the ability to effect change. We hope that this article inspires a call to action and informs individuals that they, too, can create a change. And most importantly, we look forward to a future in which all employees can reach their professional potentials, regardless of their sexual orientations.

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