Creating an LGBTQ+-Inclusive Workplace

For lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people, and those of other sexual identities (LGBTQ+), “coming out” is the term used to refer to the process of revealing sexual orientation or gender identity for the first time. Far from being a one-time rite of passage or overnight change, coming out is something LGBTQ+ people must do over and over again: to friends and family as well as every time they encounter a new person, group, or situation they wish to be open about their sexual orientation or gender identity with.

The process of coming out is different for everyone. Some people come out to everyone in their lives immediately, some take their time, and others choose to protect their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and not come out to certain people or groups. One thing that coming out has in common for most LGBTQ+ people is that it’s not easy and may elicit anxiety and fear of being ostracized and excluded.

The workplace can be a particularly sensitive and challenging environment for employees to come out. As a manager, you will want to do your best to make your workplace a safe and comfortable environment for everyone. Here are some tips to encourage inclusivity and diversity when it comes to sexual orientation and gender identity.

Make your workplace’s discrimination policy available. Your workplace should have an anti-discrimination policy in place to cover sexual orientation and gender identity. Make sure this policy is up to date and readily available to your employees.

Don’t make any assumptions. It’s easy to assume, if you’re straight, that others are too, and our language often conveys these assumptions. Replace questions like “do you have a husband?” with neutral language like “do you have a partner?” By doing this, you will model appropriate behavior for your direct reports so it becomes the norm.

Allow people to identify as gender neutral. Allow your employees a third gender option on any official forms, or allow them to answer “prefer not to say."

Celebrate LGBTQ+ pride. Many cities around the world dedicate specific days, weeks, or months to celebrating gay pride within their communities. Bringing the celebration into the workplace can help you demonstrate to your team and organization that you value acceptance, respect, inclusiveness and diversity. Displaying symbols of pride like a positive space sticker or flag in your workspace shows everyone that you are committed to a LGBTQ+ positive workplace and may make employees more comfortable in coming out. Check online for what Pride events are happening in your community and for other resources like videos, stories, or an online event to share with your team.

Bring education into the workplace. Educating yourself and your workforce is of vital importance in keeping current on the best practices to foster diversity and inclusivity. Invite a trainer who specializes in LGBTQ+ inclusivity or a local LGBTQ+ organization to lead a workshop for you and your staff.

Though visibility of LGBTQ+ people has increased and there have been gains in formal rights, discrimination still exists. It is possible that your workplace will include people who are prejudiced against these identities. Make it your mission to have a zero tolerance policy towards any harassment, homophobic, or transphobic language in the workplace. Encourage anyone who has a problem or feels uncomfortable coming out to speak with you or a human resources (HR)

representative. If any of your employees need additional support, you can also encourage them to speak to a counselor with your assistance program.

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