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# The Power of Inclusion: What Gay and Lesbian Employees Want Marriott School Students to Know

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by Lisa Love Snyder and Hannah Salzl

I have felt like, 'Well, they don't want me,' and it's not because I don't have much to give. It's because they don't want the image. I've accepted that," said Emily, a lesbian employee in a conservative organization.

And Emily isn't alone. One in ten gay employees have left a job because of workplace discrimination for their sexual orientation. In fact, Emily asked that we keep her name anonymous, since she's applying for a promotion at work. She was quick to note the irony – in a discussion about inclusion, she had to exclude herself.

We are sensitive to the fact that there are many diverse perspectives to consider in the workforce. To be inclusive, we need to weigh the values and morals of all team members. In this article, we discuss a narrow aspect of inclusion (the perspective

of gays and lesbians), and we encourage readers to go beyond our research and seek their own experiences with diversity.

**Method**

We asked gay and lesbian employees about their experiences in the workplace, positive and negative, and their advice for Marriott School students. Some of the people we interviewed had management experience and mentioned management principles in their responses. We've included references to relevant research in the footnotes.

Our interview groups included four women (two pairs of spouses - Emily and Linda, and Tori and Claire) and one man (James), all openly gay. According to the women we interviewed, being openly gay in the workplace is harder for men. Despite our

best efforts, we could only find one man who was both gay and a white-collar professional, and who was out and willing to speak with us.

By request, all names have been changed to protect workplace reputations.

**Interview**

**Have you ever experienced discrimination in the workplace based on your sexual orientation?**

**Emily** - I think there's a chance that I've hit the glass ceiling here, and it's not because I'm not smart or experienced

and it's not because I'm a woman. I think because [my bosses] are so conservative, it'd be very hard for them to have to be out at picnics and team building activities with me as part of the leadership, not like my friend just got to be part of with her promotion. She's going to be able to, but she's got the right kind of family and I ... I don't. I've accepted that.

**How did that discrimination affect your work?**

**Linda** - The one thing about being gay that's different from [being] black or female is that when you're gay you can kind of hide. People can't really look at you and say, "Oh, you're gay." Not usually. When we're in a meeting together and somebody's trying to be sensitive about a gender-sensitive issue, they'll try not to be offensive to a woman. So they're not going to make a joke or make a comment that's off-color or anything like that because they can look and say, "I've got women in [the] room." But with the gay population, when you're all sitting around a table you don't

know who's gay.

**Tori** - Or you don't think there is a gay person.

**Linda** - Exactly. And so they make those offensive comments and that shuts down trust. Am I going to comment now that someone's ruined that trust? I might take it personally. I might think that person's idea is a great idea, but if they've just made some kind of a comment that is shameful to my family or who I am, I'm not going to work with that person on their idea. Even though I could agree 100 percent with every-thing they're talking about from a project perspective, I've just been offended by them, so am I going to give my all to that person on their project? Probably not. I'm going to take that personally and hold it. I might not ever speak about it if I'm not safe enough to be able to say, "That's not appropriate" or whatever.

**Tori** - From a management perspective, you've just changed the dynamic of your team. And instead of having a safe environment for everyone where everyone's willing to contribute where you all can be successful together, you just lost one of your individuals and you don't even know it. I think a lot of times the challenge to a manager is that you have to be overly sensitive to those things. It might not even be your employee, but your employee's daughter who's gay.

**Have you experienced any other workplace behavior that made you feel uncomfortable or discriminated against?**

**Tori** - The other thing I think is really interesting about being gay and lesbian is that when people hear that about you it's like ... it's like that's who you are. If you're

heterosexual it's like, "Oh, this is my husband," and you just move on. If you're heterosexual, that's only a singly little itty bitty piece of who you are. Everything else is about what you know, what you contribute, what you learn, how you engage with people. For us, a lot of times when you tell people that you're gay that's the only thing they think you are. So you have to keep in mind that that's just a small part of who we are. There's all these other pieces of who you are or who all the other folks in the room are.

**"I think a lot of times the challenge to a manager is that you have to be overly sensitive to those things."**

We had a fellow who was the chief commercial officer for us. He carried his Bible to work with him every day. He had his Bible sitting on his desk every time he'd talk to somebody. Well, right there he'd just put a barrier to folks who may not have that same belief. So I think sometimes it's also the things you surround yourself with. Think of the sayings you put on your wall in your office. Think of the kind of pictures you put out. It's great to share information about your family, but be careful about what you're insinuating. You're a manager now. You need to live your values, of course, but you're a leader now and not everyone is going to think like you.

**What have managers done to make you feel accepted?**

Tori - I've had managers that I've been extremely out and open with. I think you wait until you can feel that there's a trusting environment. You kind of make sure. It's not the first thing you talk about, usually, but you make sure that there's some kind of trusting environment.

Linda - I think that trust thing is really

critical. Because before you're really willing to share, you want to know what that reaction might be. In terms of management, I think when you get into difficult situations if you can't be 100 percent truthful (because you're trying to tell parts of the of who you are without giving away all of it), it really makes that relationship more difficult. You know what I mean? It's like you don't have a real true, authentic relationship if one person's holding back.

We all have our first experience coming out to a straight person. If it's a positive experience, we're more likely to do it again. It's critical that a gay person's coming out has some piece of a positive to it. Otherwise, why would you risk doing that again?

**What advice do you have for future managers?**

Tori - From a management perspective, vv workforce is a more effective workforce. You get better viewpoints, no matter what type of diversity you're talking about. If it's a bunch of white men sitting around a room, then you're going to get one perspective. If it's got women, if it's got gays and lesbians, if it's got Latinos, you get a better perspective. It's a fact supported by research. So, talking about management in today's environment, you're not managing one or two people. You're probably managing a group of people, and you want to surround yourself with the most effective people who can help you be productive.

Take it from the viewpoint that, as managers, you're building teams. You want to build a team that is the most productive at whatever you're doing. That means you need diversity. That means you need all those sorts of things. Think about it. You're going through school now. You're going into the workforce. You want to be the most successful you can be and this is a piece of what helps you be there. Whether your religion supports gay marriage or not, you need a diverse pool of people in order to have the best people on your team and get different perspectives.

Linda - And I'll take that one step further too. I think part of it is respect for everybody in that room. Everybody uses the term "politically correct", but I think if we have love and respect for one another we're not going to make those off comments about anything because we love and appreciate everybody. That almost nips it in the bud, but it's a hard point to get to in a work environment with different people.

**"... a diverse workplace is a more effective workplace."**

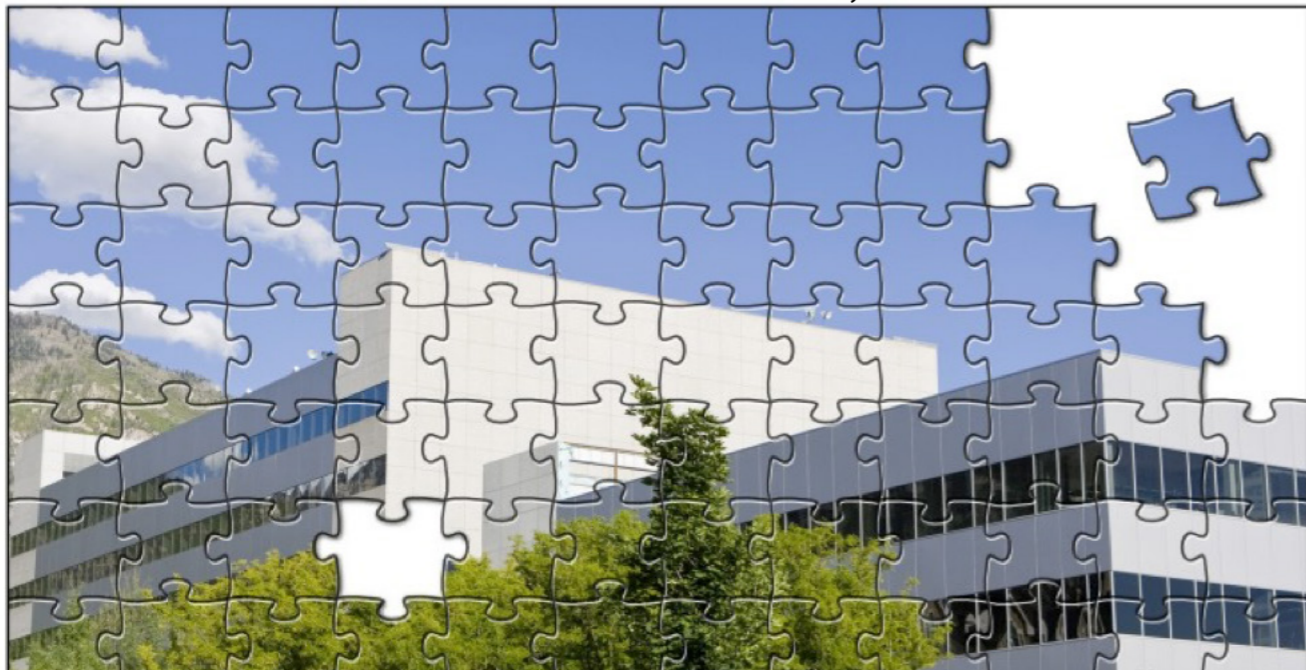
Tori - It is, but I think you can do things to make it easier. From a management perspective, you have to stop and think, "What are my management principles?"

When I step in to manage a team, what's the first thing I'm going to put in front of them?" And encourage your folks to sit down and list their six, seven, eight management principles that they're going to start with as soon as they step into that management roll. And they don't need to be long. Just two or three words on each of point, whether it be "trust", "openness", "collaboration". Whatever those are, you have to build them out for yourself.

I think if you start with that as a team, you don't have to go back afterwards and go, "Oh boy. Somebody made that off comment. I gotta come back to the team and now tell them this is going to be our management principle." If you start right off, you lay the groundwork for avoiding future issues.







Like the pieces of a puzzle, individuals on a team can't work to their fullest unless each person is appreciated for their unique contributions to the whole. You can't force a puzzle piece to function in a place where it doesn't fit.

Linda - That comes back to your trust. How do we establish trust? It's with these norms or these principles, and being committed to them equally. That will build natural trust.

Emily - As a leader it gives you the ability to go to someone who violated one of those and say, "This comment you made in the meeting today, did it really fit within these guidelines that we agreed were going to be our way of behaving?"

Tori - And if you've agreed on the front end it's much easier. Right off the bat we do this as a team. In each of the one-on-one calls I have with my people to begin with, we talk about our norms and I ask if there are any others I need to be thinking about. And I ask them to keep me true to them. I think sometimes you can put those things out and say, "Yeah, this is what I want to do, but am I really going to live this way?" If you say, "You keep me true to these, and I'll keep you true too", then it's much easier to go back and say, "We agreed on this, and what you're doing doesn't seem to fit with these principles or norms."

What can students do now to prepare to enter a diverse workforce?

James - Start now to open yourself up to other experiences. There are different clubs at BYU like USGA. Expose yourself to different experiences that are outside your realm of comfort. [Go] to learn more and to understand so that you can have a formal opinion on it.

It comes down to the matter of deciding for yourself that you're going to open yourself up to learning from others, but that that doesn't mean that you're stepping away from your values or from your beliefs that you hold onto in the church. If anything, you are strengthening your values because you want to have a better understanding and a more formal opinion of tolerance. I've been really surprised at times when I came out to people who were strongly anti-gay, but the second I came out to them they were so loving.

Linda - If we would just take the time to listen to each other's stories and to understand how each person got to their conclusion, maybe we wouldn't be so far apart.

## Conclusion

Let's be honest. No one expects you to be perfect. In fact, admitting mistakes and seeking advice can build a trusting environment. When in doubt, do what we did.

Ask questions. Talk to people. Listen to their stories and learn what they need. As Emily said, "We have a lot of hope for the next generation. You guys will be different. The fact that you're asking these questions and having these discussions shows that. I think we're going to be okay."

## The Bottom Line

1. Create an environment of TRUST  
Listen to and empathize with your co-workers.  
Get to know their stories.
2. Be OPEN to differences.  
Get involved in local clubs such as USGA (Understanding Same-Gender Attraction).
3. Watch workroom LANGUAGE.  
Be considerate in your speech, no matter who is around you.
4. Establish NORMS with your team.  
Every member on your team wants to be respected.  
Lay the groundwork to avoid future problems.

1. Fidas, Deena. "The Cost of the Closet and the Rewards of Inclusion." Human Rights Campaign Foundation (2014).

2. For more information about establishing norms, refer to the following articles:

Ehrhart and Naumann, "Organizational Citizenship Behavior in Work Groups: A Group Norms Approach," (2004), and Tuckman and Jensen, "Stages of Small-Group Development Revisited," (1977).