



Ally Tips for the Workplace

Being an Ally!

Have you ever been part of a group that was new to the workplace....as a woman, a person of color, or maybe someone younger than the rest of the employees? Try to remember that feeling of being the “other.” It helps to understand what LGBT employees face today!

What is an ally?

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) defines a straight ally as someone who is supportive and accepts the LGBT person. A straight ally is someone who personally advocates for equal rights and fair treatment. Allies are some of the most effective and powerful voices of the LGBT movement. Not only do allies help people in the coming-out process, they also help others understand the importance of equality, fairness, acceptance, and mutual respect. LGBT employees can also be allies to each other. If I speak up for transgender rights as a lesbian, I am an ally to transgender employees in that moment. When an ERG changes their name to clearly demonstrate their inclusion of bisexual and transgender employees, not just gay men and lesbians, they are being allies to bisexual and transgender people.

A hurdle straight men face as they become LGBT allies and speak up in the workplace is the questioning of their heterosexuality (“Wow, Bob, I thought you were straight” when you tell a group to not tell an LGBT joke). This pressure to go along with co-workers who say they are “just kidding around” is one of the hardest parts of being an ally! Men can speak in defense of women and never have another man say “Wow, Bob, I didn’t realize you were a woman.” Speaking up means you “come out” as an ally, and it makes a difference in the workplace every time you do it!

What to do

- The best way to break down myths and stereotypes is by personally knowing someone who is LGBT. If you don’t have any LGBT friends—not just acquaintances—make a point of stretching your social circle so that you do. You’ll be surprised at what you learn.
- We may have been taught a certain way to think or have seen images in the media that shape our beliefs about LGBT employees. Those things you heard may or may not be the truth about the LGBT community. Either way, as an ally, it is what you do about naming and dispelling myths and stereotypes that is important for increasing understanding in the workplace.
- You sometimes hear people say that they don’t like LGBT employees at work because they don’t want them to behave like they have seen at Pride events. I often ask them if they ever went to Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Those behaviors don’t belong in the workplace either.
- What do you do when you hear a comment like some of these in the workplace? First, be aware, and realize that it is a myth or stereotype about LGBT employees. Next, don’t go along with the group and let it pass; instead say something. You don’t have to be confrontational, just say, “Hey, that’s not OK” or “I don’t think that’s true.” There are others who may be thinking the same thing and will appreciate you speaking up, especially if they are LGBT.
- Our assumptions impact everyone. For example, we might have a stereotypical image of a straight male, but there are lots of exceptions. In the 1960’s, hippies were not considered real men. Today, how many men use hair products and get their nails done?

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Both used to be considered something only women did. Stereotypes prevent us from seeing the person. The ability to embrace change and the freedom to express yourself are two key aspects of diversity.

Questions and Tips

- Q *I have heard GLBT too - does it make a difference?* No, it does not! The order varies around the world, and you may also hear other letters included like A=Ally or Asexual, Q=Queer or Questioning; I=Intersex or Interested. How to decide which to use? You can ask a co-worker which they prefer or check local LGBT community resources for the preferred order in your area!
- Q *This is the first time we have used the word "queer."* Although listed on the terminology sheet, queer is a term a person may feel comfortable using to self-identify, but allies shouldn't describe LGBT employees as "queer" when talking about them with other employees, because it is seen as negative when used by non-LGBT people. Many Baby Boomers will react strongly to this term while Gen X and Gen Y employees may embrace it.
- Q *When I meet someone for the first time and they are transgender, what pronouns should I use?* There are two approaches here:
 - o You can look at the person and make your best guess on whether to use "he" or "she." They will correct you if you are wrong. Just say thanks and remember to use the right pronoun in the future.
 - o The other way is to ask the individual which they prefer. Sometimes you might get a strong reaction to this method if they don't understand why you couldn't tell that they are a man or women, but for someone who is LGBT, they will appreciate the effort to get to know them!
- Q *Can you tell by looking at someone if they are transgender and if they have had surgery, taken hormones or started to transition? Does it make a difference in how you would treat someone who is transgender?* The simple answer is "not necessarily." You might wonder whether someone is transgender, however, you should not ask.
 - o It isn't appropriate to ask whether someone has or has not had surgery or started hormones if they identify as transgender. These are medical privacy issues that each person may, or may not, choose to share. Trying to guess, and talking among other co-workers, creates an unsafe environment for the transgender employee. Consider whether you would like your co-workers to know all the medical details of your life.
- Q *What is the correct term to use for someone who has a gender identity that is different from the sex they were when they were born?* Everyone also has a gender identity, which may or may not be the same as their birth sex (a.k.a. assigned sex). For those whose birth and current gender identity are different, transgender is the best term, regardless of whether they have had or will have any transition treatments.
- T When you first meet someone, there are almost always questions about family. If you ask me as a woman if I am married and have a husband, I assume you are heterosexist or not accepting of LGBT. I might choose to make up a story or just not answer your question. You can ask about family using more neutral language. Try saying: "So, are you in a relationship?" or "Do you have a partner?" There is room in these questions for someone who is LGBT to answer.

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- T** Everyone has a sexual orientation. Due to media attention, when someone asks what your sexual orientation is, it is often assumed that you are being asked if you are lesbian, gay, or bisexual, not heterosexual! However heterosexual is a sexual orientation, too.
- T** Employees sometimes say that it is hard for them to change pronouns when someone is transgender. Consider the fact that we adjust very easily when a woman comes into work and changes her last name after she is married. We may make a mistake once in a while but we adjust quickly to her new name. What's going on with us when we find changing pronouns to be so much harder?
- T** If a woman goes into a traditionally male job or work sector, one of the rumors that can start in the workplace is that she is a lesbian. Heterosexual women have faced these kinds of comments for years.
- T** Women also deal with questioning of their sexual orientation when they turn down a man for a date. One of the common replies or rumors that get started is that they didn't accept the date because they were lesbian, instead of just the fact they weren't interested in dating the man.
- T** Bisexuals face discrimination from both the heterosexual and LGBT communities. If they are with someone of the same sex, the heterosexual community isn't comfortable with them. And, when they are with someone of the opposite sex, there is a sense that they are now straight and are no longer part of the LGBT community. This makes it hard to share your life with those at work, and an ally can make all the difference to bisexual employees.
 - Even though the "B" is technically included in "LGBT community," bisexual people often describe feeling erased or silenced in the larger community. "Monosexual" people—both gay people AND straight people—often hold similar myths and stereotypes about bisexuals.
- T** Asexuals are the newest group to discuss their rights and identities. Asexual people self-define as not experiencing sexual attraction, though they may experience romantic attraction. Asexual people may choose to be single, partnered, or to date. They may have intimate relationships that are non-sexual, but are otherwise no different from any other intimate relationship.