

# Cultural Diversity at Work

*Preparing You for Managing, Training and Conducting Business in the Golden Age*

## Let's Talk About Sexual Orientation.

By Dr. Donna Goldstein and Jay Asher

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Francine, a high-level, divorced executive, wrote a letter to colleagues, relatives and friends that mentioned her happiness with a new partner.

When we called to congratulate her and find out more about him, she shared that her new partner was a fabulous woman. Even though she has participated in-and even led-diversity training, she was very cautious about revealing this information.

Every workplace has a nearly palpable temperature related to sexual orientation. Both employees and prospective employees can sense what makes the mercury rise and what doesn't. Before employees will openly dialogue about sexual orientation, their company culture must openly accept all lifestyles.

Here are five ways to make sure all employees feel respected and included-no matter what their sexual orientation.

### Five ways to get oriented

1. Don't assume all your colleagues are heterosexual or married. Depending on your location and industry, you can expect from 5 to 25 percent of them to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. Start with invitations to company events or company-sponsored programs: Make sure employees know they can bring their significant others. Don't expect to see changes right away, as it may take some time for staff to feel safe.

2. Consider the inclusivity of human-resources procedures and policies. The traditional definition of "family" can expand to include partners, children and relatives. Health-insurance benefits, pension plans and relocation benefits also may need to be more inclusive of domestic partners. One gay male manager's company denied him funeral leave when his long-term partner's mother died. In your organization, would a lesbian be able to take sick leave to care for her partner's biological child, whom she helped raise? (What if she were a heterosexual step mom?)

3. In management, diversity and sexual harassment training, make every effort to include

the views of employees with diverse perspectives. If staff know they can be honest without fear of retaliation or reprisal, you might be surprised at what surfaces. One executive, who felt certain that all his employees received fair treatment, learned to his dismay that some managers used impressed hand gestures to mimic gay employees. At another organization, religious e-mail circulated after the death of an openly gay employee, suggesting that AIDS is punishment for sin. Use discussions about these incidents to develop and disseminate both formal anti-discrimination policies and practices, and to start informal conversations about the culture your company desires.

4. Spend some time assessing your organizational climate for gay receptivity. Gay affinity groups can help raise issues of communication and inclusion. Do you advertise in gay-oriented publications? Do you contribute to causes such as AIDS? Have you created a safe environment where employees can share their differences? If they "come out," do they believe it will hurt their chances for career development or upward mobility?

5. Perhaps the most important way individuals can confront stereotypes is by getting to know each other, one at a time. Ask honest questions, as you would if you wanted to better understand the experience of a Cuban American or a single parent. How would you respond if you received a letter like Francine's?



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