Embracing and supporting LGBT diversity can lead to better individual and organisational outcomes

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Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) employees face unique challenges in the workplace with respect to discrimination and the decision to disclose their gay identity. However, when LGBT diversity is properly managed through the use of inclusive policies and supportive organisational cultures, organisations can realize the benefits of a more diverse workforce. In this article, I highlight some issues faced by LGBT employees and provide recommendations for how managers and organisations can support LGBT employees. By following these recommendations, I argue that all employees and the organisation as a whole are better off when LGBT diversity is embraced.

Discrimination & Disclosure

LGBT employees' experience with discrimination in the workplace can be especially difficult. Although LGBT employees in the UK have legal protection from discrimination under the Equality Act 2010, it is not uncommon for LGBT employees to encounter discrimination or bullying at work. According to research conducted by Stonewall, one in five gay men and lesbians have experienced discrimination or bullying in the workplace. Furthermore, almost a third of these employees said their manager was responsible. Unlike some other stigmatised groups, LGBT employees may have a more difficult time confronting this negative treatment because doing so requires LGBT employees to disclose their gay identity.

According to a poll conducted by Stonewall, approximately 60% of LGBT employees in the UK have not openly disclosed their gay identity at work. This statistic shows the decision to openly disclose gay identity is not easy for many LGBT employees. On one hand, gay men and lesbians who conceal their gay identity are more likely to experience psychological stress, stress-related illnesses, and lower performance at work. On the other hand, gay men and lesbians who disclose their gay identity leave themselves vulnerable to discrimination and bullying in organisations without a supportive culture. However, my own research and the work of other diversity management researchers suggests that when LGBT employees disclose their identity in a supportive culture, the performance of the openly LGBT employees, their co-workers, and the organisation as a whole improves. Thus, by creating an inclusive and supportive organisational culture where employees can express their authentic selves, everyone can win.

Recommendations

In order to maximize the benefits of a diverse workforce, organisations need to create and maintain an inclusive organisational culture that embraces and supports LGBT diversity. How can organisations create this type of culture?

1) Adopt organisational policies that embrace and support LGBT employees

By adopting formal benefits and HR policies that are inclusive of LGBT employees, companies can comply with the Equality Act 2010 and make LGBT employees feel valued at work. Additionally, organisations should include LGBT employees in their harassment and bullying policies and should create an LGBT employee network. Research shows that when organisations adopt these policies, LGBT employees feel more satisfied with their jobs, are more likely to disclose their gay identity, experience less discrimination, and perform better. Interestingly, research has also found that the entire organisation performs better after adopting LGBT-friendly HR policies. In 2014, Stonewall's Workplace Equality Index, which measures LGBT workplace culture, found that the average organisation scored 115 points out of 200, suggesting there is room for organisations to improve in this area.

2) Create an environment where everyone feels they can bring their authentic selves to work.

Although creating a safe and inclusive environment specifically benefits LGBT employees who may be deciding whether to disclose their gay identity, there are also benefits for all employees. Research has shown that employees who feel they can be their authentic selves at work are more satisfied with their jobs and experience greater psychological well-being. To create a safe and inclusive environment, organisations and managers should strive to be authentic by seeking out feedback from employees, giving employees access to information, being honest with employees, and including employees in the decision making process.

3) Provide training, development, and mentoring so LGBT employees can progress in leadership positions

One reason why LGBT employees are under-represented in leadership positions is the lack of visible LGBT role models and mentors in senior leadership positions. To help LGBT employees progress in the organisation, there should be a mentoring program for LGBT employees with the goal of cultivating talented employees for senior leadership positions. With respect to training and development, organisations should provide diversity training for all staff and managers that includes a specific focus on LGBT issues. Organisations should also offer LGBT employees access to leadership programs specifically geared toward LGBT employees. Because recent research has shown organisations with more openly LGBT leaders perform better than organisations without openly LGBT leaders, following these suggestions should lead to better outcomes not just for LGBT employees, but for organisations too.