



Dr. Prayson



Dr. Rowe

LGBTQ

Inclusivity and Language in the Workplace

Richard A. Prayson, MD, MEd, and J. Jordi Rowe, MD

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To quote Bill Crawford, “Diversity, or the state of being different, isn’t the same as inclusion. One is a description of what is, while the other describes a style of interaction essential to effective teams and organization.”

The workplace should be an environment where people feel safe to focus on getting work done. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Diversity, which can be defined as acknowledging, understanding, accepting, valuing and celebrating differences, is desirable in the workplace.¹ Benefits to diversity within the workplace include increasing marketing opportunities, increasing recruitment potential, bolstering creativity and fostering a better business image.

However, diversity comes with its challenges. Managing diversity is not just about acknowledging differences, but it involves appreciating the value of differences, guarding against discrimination and promoting inclusiveness.¹ Negative behaviors and attitudes in the workplace (prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination) can create barriers to diversity and inclusiveness and ultimately result in poor morale, impaired productivity and litigation. The focus of this article is on one particular aspect of workplace diversity: sexual orientation and identity.

In 2017, it was estimated that 4.5 percent of the general population in the United States was LGBT (lesbian,



gay, bisexual, transgender), up from 3.5 percent in 2012. The increase seems to be primarily driven by millennials (those born between 1980-1999).² Women are more likely to identify as LGBT than men and LGBT identification is more common among those with lower incomes.² About four out of 10 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer and/or questioning (LGBTQ) individuals report feeling bullied at work.³ The majority of people indicated that they were bullied by one person; 13 percent indicated that it happened in a group setting.³ Of those who were bullied, 5 percent said they called in sick because of the bullying and about 20 percent said they had health-related issues because of it.³

Further compounding the issue is that there are 72 countries worldwide that prohibit discrimination in employment because of sexual orientation but the United States is not one of them; there are no federal laws protecting the rights of employees from discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.⁴ Protection by state laws exist in 28 states.⁴

Being cognizant of differences and respectful of all employees in the workplace is important to maintaining a productive and healthy work environment. Below are five strategies or approaches to fostering an environment of inclusion.

1. Learn the language: LGBTQ is an acronym that encompasses a wide spectrum of diverse sexualities and genders. Many people refer to the “Q” standing for “queer” as an umbrella term under which there are a variety of identities. Lesbian, gay and bisexual refer to sexualities, while transgender refers to gender. Gender is not the same as sexual orientation. One’s identity is not the same as gender expression, which is not the same as anatomical sex. The terms are not interchangeable.

2. Watch the language you use: Being aware of the language you use in day to day conversation is important. For example, instead of saying “ladies and gentlemen,” consider instead saying “everyone” or “folks.” This approach is more inclusive of people of all genders and moves away from using binary language, which may not be perceived as applying to everyone. Instead of using appellations like “mailman” or “policeman,” consider using alternative designations such as “mail clerk” or “mail person” or “police officer.” Why? People of all genders do these jobs. Avoid referring to someone as “it,” when pronouns are not known; it would be better to refer to that person as “they.” “It” refers to things, not people. The term “gay” is preferred to “homosexual.” “Homosexual” often denotes a medical definition or a discomfort with gay/lesbian people. Despite best intention, statements such as “transgender people are normal people” may be construed as stigmatizing; saying “normal” to some implies “abnormal.”

3. Ask for preferred pronouns: Being aware of and familiar with the use of personal gender pronouns is important. Asking individuals what their preferred pronouns are is respectful and avoids embarrassment latter. Most commonly, individuals refer to themselves as she/her/hers or he/him/his. However, there are other preferences out there. They/them/theirs are common gender neutral pronouns that can be used in the singular. Ze (sometimes spelled “zie” or “xe”/hir/hir) is another set of pronouns that individuals may want you to use. Some people prefer that you just use their name and not use pronouns at all. Do not refer to a person as “it” or “she-he”; these are considered by most to be offensive.

4. No tolerance for bullying: As we have discussed before, bullying in this arena is not uncommon, whether it is in the workplace, in social venues or at school.

Educating your workforce on the importance of diversity and inclusion of all types is important. If people feel bullied, they need to feel there is a resource to go to for help and support. Such behavior should be directly addressed.

5. It is OK to apologize if you slip up: Everyone makes a mistake on occasion. The best approach when you realize you may have made a mistake is to correct yourself right away. In using a wrong pronoun, correcting yourself by saying “I’m sorry, I meant (correct pronoun):” If you realize later that you made a mistake, apologizing in private is appropriate. Keep it brief and direct; a rambling apology becomes awkward for both parties.

The more an organization can create and maintain an open culture accepting of diversity, the better its people will perform. Diversity and inclusion allows for an open exchange of ideas and different perspectives. At the end of the day, it is about the patients we take care of and trying to do the best work we can on their behalf. As we look forward to the future, Inge Beale, CEO of Lloyds of London suggests that, “Inclusion is the foundation of innovation and having an open, accepting, and diverse workforce will enable us to succeed in a changing and challenging world.”

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Dr. Prayson is Section Head of Neuropathology at the Cleveland Clinic and Professor of Pathology at the Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine of Case Western Reserve University. Dr. Rowe is a Breast Pathologist and Assistant Professor of Pathology at the Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine of Case Western Reserve University.