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## Interacting with Your Gay and Lesbian Colleague

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## Interacting with Your Gay and Lesbian Colleague

### Abstract

A diversity subject, rarely discussed, is how we interact with our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered colleagues. While it is a very uncomfortable subject for many, we can only begin to grow in our awareness if we begin the dialog. This article brings a voice to this topic with the hope to facilitate this journey of acceptance and inclusion.

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We are all on a journey. That is a reality. I am grateful for my journey as a gay man. It has been one of a deeper and a more powerful self-acceptance. I have found it equally gratifying to watch my family, friends, and coworkers in their journey. They have markedly changed as they have processed new information and gained experiences. I have observed each of these individuals become more comfortable, more supportive, and more willing to demonstrate a level of support they may never have imagined.

And yet my experience in Cooperative Extension has shown that while we are moving along in that journey, we have significant work to do in order to gain a higher level of acceptance for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered individuals. Acceptance at its most basic level is an acknowledgement of who you are--a person of a specific sexual orientation, with the same humanity as everyone else. This acceptance is critical to a healthy work environment for all colleagues, as well as to an organization aiming to be accessible to those who define themselves as coming from those communities. There is never really a specific destination in this journey, but rather a positive approach for continual change.

### What Is The Current State of the Issue?

In the 2007 Penn State Outreach Diversity Climate Survey Executive Summary (of which Extension is one unit), 6% of survey participants designated themselves part of an underrepresented group based on sexual orientation. Sexual orientation tied as the characteristic most frequently mentioned regarding negative experiences.

Sixty-five percent of the employees who consider themselves members of an underrepresented group based on sexual orientation reported that they have hidden or downplayed their sexual orientation when dealing with a supervisor or with colleagues due to fear of negative consequences. Fifty-three percent reported that they have felt intimidated by others because of their sexual orientation.

One critical aspect to sexual orientation is the lack of a key visual component. While not always, many aspects of diversity have such a visual element--gender, race, physical disability. There are many stereotypic traits associated with being gay or lesbian, but we can't be truly certain simply by observation.

I recently spoke to a class of teachers working on their Masters Degree, and 20 of the 25 participants said they had virtually no exposure to anyone gay or lesbian. I shared with them that most of them probably had more exposure than they realized, because they lived in a region where many people did not feel safe to be "out" (open about their sexual orientation). This skews their perception, because in their personal reality, what is not part of their awareness does not

seem to exist.

So we should never feel as if the issue is not relevant to our lives. The gay colleagues I have met in Extension have more often not been open about their sexual orientation and stated that they were fearful of negative consequences.

## Why Is This Relevant?

Recently on a television news program it was stated that the most important factor in people being satisfied in their work place was that an interest was taken in their lives so that they did not feel like they worked in anonymity. This speaks volumes to the gay person in the work environment. If colleagues know a coworker is gay, they are typically less prone to ask the typical questions asked of other coworkers: "What did you do this past weekend?" "How is your family?" "Where did you go on vacation?" Of course, the other side of the coin is the comfort level of the gay colleague. If the environment is not safe for the individual, then he or she will most likely not be comfortable answering any of those questions or do so carefully choosing pronouns as to keep their information vague.

The inference that information needs to be secret or hushed carries the implication that the workplace would condemn the individual. In order to have colleagues exhibit greater acceptance, Extension leadership must initiate professional development. Speaking about all other groups of diversity but ignoring homosexuality would slow the pace towards greater acceptance. We are each at such different places in terms of our comfort. There is no right or wrong in our comfort levels--we are a product of those life experiences that have exposed us to those who are gay and lesbian to this point in time.

## The Personal Story

As part of one performance review I was counseled (with good intention) to not discuss any part of my personal life because colleagues claimed to be uncomfortable. Imagine how I felt as colleagues spoke about whom they were dating, their family, children, and friends, knowing that I was advised to deny myself the same basic privilege. I observed my Extension colleagues in teaching settings often citing a personal scenario related to their home life. With the guidance I had been given, I would not be able to do the same. There is a basic lack of human equality that exists in counsel to basically hide one's life. Institutionally, this means there was no obligation put on colleagues to grow, and all responsibility to adjust was put on the gay employee.

As Extension employees, we are directly connected with people and care about our colleagues and our clients. I remember my coming out to a past administrator. While she was accepting, she was observably uncomfortable with me sharing the information. She was very compassionate and remarked that my private life was my private life and that I did not really need to share it with her. I offered her the following situation. I told her that if her husband died, we as her work family would be understanding and could support her in the work setting as she progressed through the grieving process. Then I shared that, on the other hand, if it were not known that I had a partner and he likewise had died, there would be no opportunity for collegial support to which I felt I was equally entitled. The administrator clearly had an epiphany at that moment and thanked me for providing an insight that had never been within her grasp.

I have had my own personal negative experiences. I have been the source of gossip and referred to by the crudest of terms by educators, and one colleague virtually quit all communication with me for over 8 months. But, quite frankly, none of this is as hurtful as being denied the basic humanity of being asked about my life. One of my most special moments in my current Extension position was when Marge, one of our stalwart and brassy dairy leaders who knew I was gay, came up to me at the Dairy Round-up and point blank asked if I had met someone yet. She asked the question without any regard to who was around or who might overhear. I was amused that she was so evolved. She asked the question that showed she cared and the same question she would have asked someone who was "straight."

## The Challenge

Could you so easily ask such a question? Don't berate yourself if you cannot. Just consider it a challenge on your journey to understanding your gay colleague and exhibiting the same compassionate humanity that you would offer any other coworker.

Before an institution changes, each one of us can make a difference. It lies in the words we speak, the words we tolerate being spoken, the way we treat people individually, and our openness to learn.



**Discussion**

