

Not Too Tough to Tackle: How to Build Sexual Orientation Training

By Liz Winfeld



Liz Winfeld of Common Ground Consulting is a nationally recognized expert in diversity education for adults in the workplace. Her areas of expertise are sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, and domestic partner benefits. She consults on recruitment and retention, builds and delivers customized education programs, and helps organizations formulate transition strategies for transgender employees. Liz also does extensive work with Employee Business Networks as well as one-to-one coaching for people at all levels of an organization.

Copyright © 2010 by Common Ground Consulting. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Too Tough to Tackle?

What is it that makes sexual orientation seem like such a tough diversity topic? The real answer to that question is “Backlash.” If the company is too responsive to a call for inclusion or too proactive in creating a space for GLBT employees, the push back is going to be too much to deal with. Fears about what will happen if progress happens too fast create what I think of as “the noise.”

The “noise” originates from the extremes on the right and the left where the volume is always turned up to ten. In the workplace, it comes from those who complain that including references to LGBTQA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and allies) in programs or policies will lead to opening the door to alcoholics or sex-offenders as protected classes in the workplace. Or the noise comes from those who want the company to dive head-first into the fight for same-sex marriage legalization or the rights of gays in the military—important issues no doubt, but also primarily societal issues that are usually not directly relevant to or appropriate for a public or private sector for-profit, non-profit, union or academic institution.

The point of any workplace inclusion and diversity effort is to ensure basically two things. First, that all the people working in the organization have the opportunity to do so in a relatively safe environment that allows them common-sense freedom of expression, the ability to be who they are, and to feel like they can do what they need to do in order to maximize their productivity and job satisfaction. Second, to ensure that the company can position itself correctly publicly, to whatever extent that is appropriate, so as to fully leverage all of its abilities to be profitable or sustainable.

An organization’s decision about what aspects of their workplace diversity they will try to find inclusion methods for is going to be based on who their employees are and who their market is. Starting in around 1990 or so, that definition of the internal and external business case encompassed gay and lesbian people in a bigger way; by the mid-1990’s, bisexual people were on the radar screens, and by 2000, transgender people were. So in the last two and half decades, as more organizations found themselves with good reasons to expand D&I to include the LGBTQA population, the volume on the noise just kept cranking. That much noise will definitely get into your head and you will want to make it stop; ergo the impression that it is the battle between the extremes on the right and the left that organizations don’t want to get embroiled in. It’s just too tough.

The issues are, again, important, but the drivers for workplace D&I are what is stated above. In reality, the noise and its makers are not the point...or at least, they shouldn’t be. D&I efforts in training and development are better served by shutting out the noise and considering what really keeps people from wanting to go down the LGBTQA road. Here it is: Most people simply don’t have a clue what the words “sexual orientation” mean.

The Heart of the Matter

Now, I don’t know about you, but if I meet someone at a reception and I say, “so, what do you do?”, and they answer with something like being a specialist in “the architectural-revival-of-gothic-imperialism-from-the-14th-century-Latin-conquistadors,” my first inclination is to run for the hills or, at least, the cheese doodles. It’s not that I wouldn’t be interested; it’s just that I

know my own ignorance of architecture is going to make itself apparent in the first five minutes of the conversation. And, like most people, I am willing to cop to my own ignorance privately and even look for quiet ways to improve upon it, but in certain settings, I don't really want others to know that I'm ignorant at all. This is even truer when the topic is perceived to be one that maybe I should know about already. I seriously doubt I am the only one who feels this way.

Sexual orientation fits into that category. When I walk into a presentation or class for people at any level of an organization, from the CDOs on down, and I simply ask, "so, who can give me a three or four sentence definition of the term "sexual orientation," most times not a single person can articulate a definition. Some brave souls offer their best guesses or half-right responses; but it's rare to hear a confident, simple definition. So one of the epiphanies that can happen during training is this: although every person has a sexual orientation, few can say just what sexual orientation is. That makes sexual orientation a tough topic.

It is not just the noise that keeps training and development efforts from fully embracing sexual orientation and gender identity. It is this inability to discuss the subject matter from a common ground of understanding. It is the shared understanding of the semantics of a topic that enables people to think for themselves, discuss with others and generate meaningful, realistic strategies for inclusion.

Try This Instead

Many of us have been privy to classes in which a facilitator walks in with a written case study or a video in which a manager is dealing with a heterosexual employee, Mary, who doesn't want to work with another employee, Jeff, because Mary has just found out that Jeff is gay. Mary would appreciate it if the manager would see to it that Jeff didn't display personal effects in his cubicle, that he not bring his partner to the holiday party and that he not get domestic partner benefits, because she thinks it will increase her premium.

It's reasonable to explore cases such as this, but to have them be the sum and total of an educational module about sexual orientation is irresponsible. When a group of people can't answer the question "what does sexual orientation mean?" they won't be able to engage effectively with a case study on sexual orientation. Their silence isn't due to stupidity, but a lack of information. They walk into a class about sexual orientation with thoughts, opinions, and beliefs based on any number of factors, including upbringing, convention, myth, rhetoric, political affiliation, religious belief, what they read or were taught in school, and all manner of society-influenced materials. Those who feel the subject is too sensitive, disturbing, offensive, delicate, or personal to discuss often are the people who are relieved to discover it is in fact possible to engage in the discussion.

In the average diversity class, there is never enough time to do justice to any aspect of human diversity but we work with what we have. A facilitator should use his or her time to empower people with tools they can use to think more, ask probing questions, and then discuss those with their peers and colleagues. Until they've had an opportunity to learn some facts and appreciate the complexities of the subject matter, there's often little point in throwing them into case studies they are ill-equipped to ponder.

In building classes then, the following are important points to remember:

- ◆ These types of classes are not meant to be the be all and end all. The class is designed to give participants the language tools with which they can think, discuss, and come to their own conclusions about appropriate workplace behavior.
- ◆ Sexual orientation is not “code” for homosexuality. Classes on this topic are not about creating a better work environment for gay and lesbian people. They are about expanding workplace diversity to encompass sexual orientation which is an aspect of being human shared by every one of us.
- ◆ Most people don’t know that being transgendered has nothing to do with sexual orientation. They are not the same thing or remotely connected.
- ◆ Attention to behavior, not beliefs, should be the guiding principle of the class. An organization has the right to insist on behavioral standards, but individual people have the right to their feelings, whatever they are. When they are at work, however, they can’t act on negative perceptions of minority groups.
- ◆ Training can’t be “Gay Day”—an event for the benefit of an LGBTA cohort. Classes must be mandatory, scheduled, and accessible so people have a fair opportunity to attend. Train-the-trainer and e-learning strategies can and should be applied to these topics.
- ◆ There’s no such thing as one-size-fits-all diversity education. Every culture, hierarchy or operating system is different. Assessment and custom design are mandatory.

Given these six premises, even a class customized for an organizations’ semantics, hierarchy, and philosophy will probably include most of the following elements:

- ◆ The internal business case: How this material affects recruitment, retention, productivity, and collaboration.
- ◆ The external business case: What are the bottom-line market drivers that make this information important?
- ◆ The facts: What are “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” and “gender expression?” This is an in-depth exploration of human sexuality that encompasses biological sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, gender identity disorder, expression vs. identity, transition, homophobia, choice, lifestyle, preference and other content elements and other specifics.
- ◆ Practical application: Now you can do those case studies!

Sexual orientation is not “too tough.” There is nothing we can’t talk about if people are willing to take the time to learn the language.

To clarify the distinction, equity in taxation of employer provided health benefits would be an appropriate topic to raise because it is a workplace issue. But as a point of discussion, not as a shouted demand that the company do something about it.

Linkage

Linkage is a global organizational development company that specializes in leadership development. We provide clients around the globe with integrated solutions that include strategic consulting services, customized leadership development and training experiences, tailored assessment services, and benchmark research. Linkage's mission is to connect high-performing leaders and organizations to the futures they want to create.

With a relentless commitment to learning, Linkage also offers conferences, institutes, summits, open-enrollment workshops, and distance learning programs on leading-edge topics in leadership, management, human resources, and organizational development. More than 200,000 leaders and managers have attended Linkage programs since 1988.

Linkage
Burlington, MA
781.402.5555
info@linkageinc.com