Chapter 24
Leveraging Sexual Orientation Workforce Diversity through Identity Deployment

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ABSTRACT

Disclosure decisions for lesbian and gay employees have been researched in organizational contexts. While the dilemmas associated, factors affecting, and situations encouraging or discouraging disclosure have been studied, the relatively unexplored area is how homosexuality can be strategically deployed at workplace to contest the associated stigma and bring positive social and political changes in the organizational climate. While scholars believe that remaining closeted may be the best strategy in a heterosexist and homophobic environment, studies report psychological strain, lack of authenticity, behavioral dilemmas, etc. experienced by closeted individuals, which, at minimum, lead to conflicts in daily situations of identity management and, at the peak, suicidal attempts due to perceived burdensomeness and failed belongingness. To address this dilemma in leveraging sexual orientation diversity in workplaces, this chapter deals with the framework of identity deployment offered by Bernstein (1997) to explore how homosexuality can be deployed in the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

"Since the late 1980s, FinCo, one of the oldest corporations in the Twin Cities, has had what many insiders and outsiders alike described as a strong diversity initiative as part of its corporate strategy. Yet, there was no organized GLBT group until January 1993, when a series of unrelated events catalyzed two unacquainted employees to start the Gay, Lesbian, and Friends Network. For Dean, a gay man, it was an exercise in a team-training session, in which participants were asked to write the name of a celebrity dream date on a card; as a team-building exercise, they would make a game of matching cards to participants. Faced with the choice of coming out on the spot or hiding, he left the card blank and was later chastised for not being a team player (In later

educative encounters, he used this story to answer the frequent question, "What does sexual orientation have to do with work?")" (Creed & Scully, 2000, p. 399).

With the demedicalizing of homosexuality by American Psychological Association and American Psychiatric Association in 1973 (Conger, 1975; Berkley & Watt, 2006) and the shift of conservative mindsets, making one's homosexuality visible is being increasingly seen as normal and accepted. Contrary to the previous phase when homosexuality was considered psycho-pathological and social deviance and concealing was considered more appropriate (Cain, 1991) and discourses on homosexuality were limited to criminology and psychiatry (Gruszczynska, 2009), now it is finding place in the mainstream sociological, economic, and psychological discourses (Badgett, 2001). As a result, organizational scholars are also equally eager to study this diversity after realizing that much focus was on visible social identities such as age, race, and gender (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998).

Woods (1993) captures the pervasiveness of sexual orientation identity in organizations as he observes that peer group functions and gatherings demand the presence of a spouse or partner as social obligation, especially for people holding senior positions. Managing information about their sexual identity, hence, becomes important for lesbian and gay employees (Herek, 1996; Woods, 1993; Woods & Harbeck, 1991) in such situations. The interdependence of relationship and career (Browning, et al., 1991; O'Ryan & McFarland, 2010), referring to spouse or partner during regular chats and meetings in workplaces (Creed & Scully, 2000), and congruence of sexual identity between work and non-work settings (Ragins, 2004, 2008) bring sexual identity to the workplace which may be very normal, usual and obvious for heterosexual employees, but not for gay and lesbian employees (Creed & Scully, 2000). This brings sexual identity in the same league of other invisible identities like religion, occupation,

national origin, club or social group memberships, illness (Clair, et al., 2005) etc., where disclosures may not be always easy.

The belief that lesbian and gay employees constitute microscopic minority at workplace holds no good. Up to 17% of population in workplaces of USA can consist of non heterosexual workers (Powers, 1996; Gonsiorek & Weinrich, 1991). This figure is reported to be 2 to 10 percent depending on small town or metropolitan environment in another study (Michael, et al., 1994). Nonetheless, these figures still cannot reflect the true picture in organizations where closeted gay identity is reality due to fears of social exclusion, or norm due to policies in organizations like military and defense services, conservative religious institutions, and organizations that serve children (Friskopp & Silverstein, 1995; Herek, et al., 1996). Though the neglect of studying homosexuality in organizations is felt (Gonsiorek & Weinrich, 1991; Croteau, 1996; Ragins & Wiethoff, 2005), organizational scholars have still made sexual orientation an area ripe for research especially in the last two decades by dealing with issues like strategies of identity management in workplaces (Clair, et al., 2005; Creed & Scully, 2000; Button, 2004; Chrobot-Mason, et al., 2001, etc.), workplace benefits for lesbian and gay employees (Raeburn, 2004; Day & Greene, 2008), interdependence of work and same-sex relationship (O'Ryan & McFarland, 2010), LGB[1] leadership and organizational citizenship behavior (Fasinger, et al., 2010; Brenner, et al., 2010), role of legal environment (Beatty & Kirby, 2006; Berkley & Watt, 2006; Herek, 1990), workplace disclosures (Ragins, et al., 2007; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Day & Schoenrade, 1997), etc.

However, at the same time, homosexuality does not escape from the stigma associated with invisible identities (Goffman, 1963) and disclosure decisions still remain risky, calculative and planned (Ragins, 2004). Thus, management of homosexuality has received considerable scholarly attention in recent times. A review of these

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