



## Coming Out to Your Colleagues

As diversity and inclusion programs become the norm in many workplaces across the country, people identifying as LGBTQ2+ are now more willing to come out to their colleagues.

Bringing our whole selves to work, or being more authentic, increases productivity, engagement and job satisfaction. (1) Employees who spend less time and energy concealing parts of their identity have more energy for work, and organizations obviously reap the benefits of more engaged and productive employees.

To be authentic, we need to allow ourselves to be vulnerable, take risks and to let go of what other people think about us. It takes courage to be authentic. (2) If your organization has created the environment that allows employees to feel safe enough to bring their whole selves to work, you may feel comfortable coming out.

While hiding one's sexual orientation or gender identity can lead to dissatisfaction and disengagement at work, coming out can present both social and career risks. A lack of support from coworkers can be a deterrent, especially if LGBTQ2+ individuals have previously experienced discrimination in the workplace.

Coming out is complicated and is not one size fits all. It's a personal journey because we've all had different experiences and all work in different environments. What works for one, may not work for another. Research has shown that 32% of trans/gender diverse people fear they would lose their job compared to just 6% of lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals. As a result, many more trans and gender diverse folks work hard to conceal their gender identity from their coworkers. Alienation in the workplace is often more of a concern than job loss. (3) Identifying your needs and your values is a good place to start as well assessing the risks and benefits of coming out. Because it can be a repetitive process when meeting new coworkers, new managers or supervisors or when starting a new job, (3, 5) it can seem like an exhausting effort.

### Where do I start?

Human Rights Campaign recommends asking yourself some questions about the culture of your workplace and then making an action plan to ensure a successful coming out. (6)

Questions you may ask yourself about your workplace include:

- Does your employer have a written non-discrimination policy? Does it cover sexual orientation and gender identity/expression?
- Is there an LGBTQ2+ resource group at your place of work?
- What is the culture at your workplace? Do people make derogatory comments?
- Do any of your co-workers identify as LGBTQ2+?
- What are work relationships like? Does everyone keep to themselves or do people discuss their personal lives? Do people seem friendly or guarded?
- What are people's reactions when you talk about LGBTQ2+ news stories, movies or television shows?
- Do your co-workers understand and respect the importance of the use of the right pronouns?

Answering these questions may help you decide if you want to come out to your coworkers. If you feel your workplace doesn't support a safe and inclusive environment, consider speaking to HR about developing a diversity and inclusion program (you can choose to be part of the committee, but don't feel you need to take this on yourself). This could be a step forward for you—and your colleagues. Or you may determine the risks outweigh the benefits, and that is okay. The decision that you make is yours and yours alone. No one can tell you what's right for you and your situation.

If you decide that the benefits outweigh the risks, you may include the following as part of a safe coming out plan:

- If you know someone who has come out as LGBTQ2+ in your workplace, speak to them first. Having someone in your corner can really help make the discussion with supervisors feel less overwhelming.
- When talking about LGBTQ2+ issues, remain casual. The more casual and calm you are, the more likely your coworkers are to follow your cue.
- Sometimes it's easier to weave your identity into conversations by saying "my wife" or "my husband" or "when I was dating this woman," etc. Or have your partner meet you at work one day.
- Publicizing your identity at work doesn't have to take the form a big announcement. Mentioning your partner casually in your weekend plans lets people know without having to formally disclose your sexuality.
- You may choose to come out in small steps, meaning coming out to some people—cisgender and heterosexual employees too—but not others. Be sure to tell the people that you do come out to, not to share this information until you are ready.
- You may choose to pause completely and choose to come out later. Allowing this to be part of your plan lets you be in control of the decisions that you're making for your well-being.

For nonbinary and transgender folks, coming out can be more difficult, especially if transitioning. Again, creating an action plan can help you make this step while maintaining your safety. The following steps suggested by the Human Rights Council (7) may help you develop your own action plan.

- If you're just starting your transition, you may wish to discuss this with a trusted ally or work partner.
- Speaking to your manager or supervisor and Human Resources representative is a good next step. HR can help you create an action plan for coming out in the workplace.
- Discuss updating personal information, such as your name, pronouns or employee photo.
- Whether or not you are medically transitioning, you may wish to take some time off to adjust to your new gender transition. If medically transitioning, discuss the time off needed for medical appointments.

- Choosing how to come out to your co-workers is the next step. You can decide how you would prefer to do this. Think about what will be the best choice for you: individually, in a small team, personally or in an organization-wide email.
- Ask upper management how they will support you: attending meetings with you or forwarding your coming out email. This can really signal to your colleagues that management accepts you.
- Ask HR how they'll support you after you've come out. Will they be willing to field questions if you don't want to? How will they deal with discrimination that may occur after you've made your announcement?
- Set boundaries about what you will and will not talk about at work. It is unacceptable for employees to ask about medical details. Ask your manager for a plan if these situations arise.

Take your time. It may take longer for some people to feel comfortable coming out at work, and you may never do it at all. It's a personal decision. If you decide to come out, you may be pleasantly surprised at how little reaction you get. Yes, some people may be surprised at first, but you may find that many voice their support and may not actually care about your gender identity or sexual orientation.

Employers have a duty of care to all employees and ensure that they are not subject to discrimination or harassment. This journey is yours and yours alone. If you want to come out at work (or home) but need support, reach out. Professional support is available to help you navigate these situations.

#### References

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