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INCLUSIVENESS IN THE WORKPLACE: BE TRU TO YOURSELF

Story by Emily Clingman
To be true to yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

It’s been a landmark year for 30-year-old Tru Jonkman. After living his whole life being known as a female, he made a life-changing decision recently to transition to a male identity. Jonkman, who has worked in the seating plant at Herman Miller in Holland, Michigan, since 2014, had been thinking about transitioning to a male for some time.

When he finally came out as male, he did it at work. "I didn’t have the courage to move forward and identify as trans until we had a training meeting about sexual harassment," he said. "After the meeting, I told one of the members of the LGBT leadership, 'I think this is what I am.' The training gave me the courage and the comfort to say it out loud." Why at work? "I’m here more than I am just about anywhere else in the world," he said. "I want to be comfortable where I’m spending the most time.” He said overall it’s been a positive experience. Depart-
ment managers and work team leaders jumped right in to help Jonkman and to inform others. With some help from Transgender Michigan, Herman Miller facilitated a smooth transition for Jonkman.

Addressing the issues

This isn’t always the case for transgender employees. According the National Center for Transgender Equality, more than one in four transgender people have lost their job due to bias, and more than three-fourths have experienced some form of workplace discrimination. Refusal to hire, privacy violations, harassment and sexual violence on the job are common occurrences experienced by transgender people of color. Many people change jobs to avoid discrimination or the risk of discrimination. Extreme levels of unemployment and poverty lead one in eight to become involved in underground economies, such as sex and drug work, in order to survive.

Certain states do not have mandated protection for transgender employees.

Rachel Lucas, human resources and development specialist at The GLBT Community Center of Colorado in Denver explained there is some protection at the federal level, but in individual states with no protection for sexual orientation or gender identity, it’s not illegal to discriminate.

“Trans employees leave jobs themselves because they don’t feel safe or comfortable,” Lucas said. “Things can get hostile or aggressive. They feel like they don’t have a choice.”

Small things add up over time, Lucas pointed out. “Microaggressions are often described as death by a thousand cuts,” she said. “It just becomes unbearable.”

Outright harassment can be seen in the form of managers or other employees refusing to acknowledge an employee’s self-identified gender, derogatory remarks directed at a trans employee or even grabbing a trans employee’s genitals to “prove” a particular gender. Another common example is telling someone how to

dress or groom to truly pass as identified gender.

Some harassment, in the form of comments made to a transgender employee is more subtle, and maybe even unintentional, but insensitive and inappropriate nonetheless. Here are examples:

I never knew you used to be a girl.
You’re so beautiful for a trans girl.
How do you have sex?
Who’s the man when you have sex?
Are your breasts real?
Can I touch?

“In their mind, that might not be offensive,” Lucas said. “But, to a trans male, for instance, it’s not that he used to be a girl, he has always been a man inside. But now, he is transitioned and feels more at home inside his body.”

What’s in a name

There are other issues too, such as binary systems.

“Our world is pretty much set up for male and female,” Lucas said. “Job applications ask to check whether you’re female or male, and what your legal name is.”

Sometimes transgender employees don’t know what to put there because they don’t want to lie, Lucas explained, but they also don’t want to list a name (from their driver’s license or birth certificate) that doesn’t correspond with their true identity.

“If they write that they are John Smith, but show up looking like Jane Smith, that causes a lot of stress for them,” Lucas said. “So they start off the hiring process already in a conflict. There are no other options for them.”

Once someone is hired, human resources systems encounter the same issues. Even if the employer is aware and supportive of an employee’s gender identity, what box do they check in their binary system? How do they allocate insurance benefits? Gender specific dress codes also cause stress and confusion for transgender employees.
Restrooms are a huge point of stress, too, Lucas said. “It actually causes health problems,” she said. “Trans employees will avoid using the restroom in public, but that leads to urinary tract infections or bladder infections because they are holding it too long.”

Lucas noted that under the transgender umbrella, gender non-conforming individuals who don’t want to be in a box, who don’t feel they are male or female face administrative confusion and frustration. “How do they interact with that very binary gender system?” Lucas asked. “It’s definitely a conversation that continues.”

Communication matters

For Jonkman, it was the conversations about and in support of gender inclusiveness that saved him from workplace confusion and harassment. “It was very important that the work team leaders had my back,” Jonkman said, adding he works in several departments all over the plant. “The entire plant knows exactly who Tru is.”

Abe Carrillo, director for inclusiveness and diversity at Herman Miller, said the leadership and guidelines were in place. Swift action was taken to facilitate the inclusiveness everyone has been trained in. Herman Miller, in an effort to be a leader in diversity and inclusiveness, about 10 years ago implemented programs and policies within the company to score 100 percent on the Human Rights Campaign Foundation Corporate Equality Index. It’s the national benchmarking tool on corporate policies and practices pertinent to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender employees.

“To us, inclusiveness is the hard part,” Carillo said. “You can throw a bunch of people together that maybe look different or come from different areas or different thoughts, but if you don’t have the proper environment or leadership, it’s not going to work very well.”

How to Support Transgender Colleagues

Tru Jonkman, a Herman Miller transgender employee, said sometimes, in an effort not to be offensive, people don’t say anything at all about his gender change, which he says can be as frustrating as overtly discriminatory comments.

“I think that just asking, ‘Hey, what is this process like,’ is an OK question to ask,” Jonkman said, adding that identifying oneself as an ally is a good way to get a response from a transitioning person. “Sort of like, ‘I come in peace.’ ”

Jonkman said the best way to be an ally or to open a conversation is to start by asking how to be helpful. “Just say, ‘What is the best way for me to be supportive of you?’ ” Jonkman said.

GLAAD (formerly known as the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), offers the following advice for people to become better allies to transgender people.

You can’t tell if someone is transgender just by looking: Transgender people don’t all look a certain way or come from the same background, and many may not appear “visibly trans.” You should assume there may be transgender people at any gathering.

Don’t make assumptions about a transgender person’s sexual orientation: Gender identity is different than sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is about who we’re attracted to. Gender identity is about our own personal sense of being male or female (or someone outside that binary). Transgender people can be gay, lesbian, bisexual or straight.

If you don’t know what pronouns to use, listen first: It’s also appropriate to ask which pronouns an individual identifies with.

Don’t ask a transgender person what their “real name” is: For some transgender people, being associated with their birth name is a tremendous source of anxiety, or it is simply a part of their life they wish to leave behind.

Be careful about confidentiality, disclosure and outing: Some transgender people feel comfortable disclosing their transgender status to others and some do not. Knowing a transgender person’s status is personal information, and it is up to them to share it. Do not casually share this information or gossip about a person you know or think is transgender.

Don’t ask about a transgender person’s genitals, surgical status or sex life: It would be inappropriate to ask a non-transgender person about the appearance or status of their genitals, and it’s equally inappropriate to ask a transgender person those questions.

Challenge anti-transgender remarks or jokes in public spaces: It’s important to challenge anti-transgender remarks or jokes whenever they’re said and no matter who says them.

Know your own limits as an ally: Don’t be afraid to admit when you don’t know something.
Letting the employee guide the process is key, according to Carrillo. “We didn’t know if Tru wanted to be known right away,” he said.

“Being able to be a leader in my own transition at work, I was also a part of Herman Miller transitioning,” Jonkman said. “There are people that don’t agree with certain lifestyles, there’s passive aggressiveness and flat-out misgendering, but there are also policies in place.”

“We’re not here to change people’s personal convictions,” Carrillo said. “What we want to uphold is the company value of inclusiveness. We’re going to treat each other with that respect here. Everyone is extra ordinary and a valuable individual. It sets the tone for how we manage, how we lead. We want everyone to feel welcome. What we say here is that we want everyone to bring their whole selves to work. We don’t want you to leave parts of yourself behind because you are embarrassed or ashamed or feel that you are going to be in an unsafe environment because that prevents you from being the most productive or creative that you can be.”

“Treat people like people,” Jonkman said. “It’s basic.” In addition to discrimination, harassment and misunderstandings at work, the struggle for acceptance can become overwhelming and hopeless sometimes, resulting in suicide attempts in the transgender community occurring four times as much as the general population.

“There are more cultures than one,” Jonkman said. “We are a culture here at Herman Miller, which means there are transgender people in the community. Different religions and cultural backgrounds — that’s what it means to be at Herman Miller. It’s not just about making chairs. Knowing things about other people may challenge you, but everyone gets to be themselves. It’s not worth it to diminish yourself for the comfort of others.”

Jonkman said he believes in speaking up and speaking out. “Not everyone is like me though,” he said. “Allies are your armor. Rely on the people that do have that courage. There are resources to help you feel comfortable, safe and free to go to work as who you are.”

Resources for Those Looking for Support

The Human Rights Campaign workplace gender transition guidelines for employers.

Guidelines should address:

- Who in the business is charged with helping a transitioning employee manage his/her workplace transition
- What a transitioning employee can expect from management
- What management’s expectations are for staff, transitioning employees and any existing LGBT employee group in facilitating a successful workplace transition
- What the general procedure is for implementing transition-related workplace changes, such as adjusting personnel and administrative records, as well as a communication plan for co-workers and clients
- Answers to frequently asked questions about dress code and rest room use

National organizations offering transgender information and services include:

- GLAAD (www.glaad.org)
- GLBT National Help Center (www.glbthotline.org)
- Human Right Campaign (www.hrc.org)
- National Center for Transgender Equality (www.transequality.org)
- Trans Advocacy Network (www.transadvocacynetwork.org)
- Transgender Law Center (www.transgenderlawcenter.org)