

Vulnerability, Visibility and Having a Voice

What Leaders Should Know about Their
LGBTQ+ Team Members' Experience

Vulnerability and visibility are deeply intertwined for
the LGBTQ+ community.

Pride Month provides the LGBTQ+ community the chance to
remember the struggles and celebrate the triumphs in the fight
for civil rights and equal justice. The first Pride march occurred
in New York City on June 28th, 1970, on the one-year anniversary
of the Stonewall uprising. In the 52 years since, communities
across the country have taken to the streets in protest and cel-
ebration during the month of June. These Pride marches, and
now Pride Month, grew out of the fight for equality.



**It is revolutionary for any trans person to
choose to be seen and visible in a world that
tells us we should not exist.”**

LAVERNE COX

Historically, and especially prior to the June 2020 Supreme Court decision affirming that LGBTQ+ workers are protected from discrimination under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, invisibility meant inclusion — and safety — whereas visibility could lead to exclusion and sometimes physical danger. The systematic attempt at erasure is not old and is certainly not over. In 1994, the U.S. military enacted the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, under which servicemembers would not be asked about their sexual orientation, but would be discharged for disclosing it. It took until 2011 for Congress to repeal it. Over a decade later, states are signing “Don’t Say Gay” bills into law to prohibit open and honest discussion about the LGBTQ+ community in schools.

At a time where our rights are at risk and our community is being threatened, we choose to celebrate our ability to be vulnerable — and visible — in ways that were not possible even a few decades ago. As we look back on our history and look toward the future, members of Spencer Stuart’s LGBTQ+ Affinity Group shared their views on vulnerability, visibility and having a voice.

“A powerful force for silence”

For generations, LGBTQ+ people faced discrimination, harassment, even possible arrest, and many feared for their personal safety, forcing them to live in the shadows. Acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community has increased dramatically in the past 30 years, thanks in part to the willingness of some to courageously come out and endure the consequences of that decision so others could live safer, happier lives. Despite our collective progress, feeling unsafe continues to affect decisions about how much of themselves queer people can share, especially amid the rise in legislation fighting directly against LGBTQ+ equality.

“Imagine having the sense that being yourself could cost you everything. I was raised in the deep south with constant messages about being too effeminate, too bookish and too sensitive, even before puberty,” as one of our members describes their early life experience. “Today, being open about my LGBTQ+ identity and coming out nearly daily, requires me to push past those voices and messages that reach back well before the present moment. It requires vulnerability today that my 5-year-old, 10-year-old, 15-year-old and even 20-year-old closeted self could not allow. At these earlier ages I could not have imagined the conditions that allow for my current-day freedom.” Another affinity group member relates to this experience, “I could have never imagined living my life as authentically as I am today.”

Another member describes the experience of being in the military under the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy: “I know firsthand what it is like to live and work within an organization where I was legally not allowed to be visible. I lived with constant fear, a fear that if I admitted who I was I could lose a job that I truly loved. My options were to hide and keep my job or be visible and lose it. Looking back, I learned the true importance of visibility because others had to fight for my right to be who I am. By being visible now, I can show people that I’m no different than anyone else.”

Efforts to deny health coverage to transgender people, the growing use of religious exemptions to allow organizations to ignore certain non-discrimination laws, and the introduction of anti-LGTBQ+ laws have created new fears and opened old wounds for many in our community — and increased the risks for some of being visible, even in daily interactions. “Every time I have come out to someone, even through a casual comment that implies my sexual orientation, it requires vulnerability. I think to myself “is this person going to look at me differently? Will there be a pause? How will their knowledge of my sexuality impact their perception of me as a co-worker?” Adds another member, “I always wonder in the back of my mind [after coming out to someone], will they see me for the work I do or will they only see me for my LGBTQ+ identity?”

“Studies have shown that a majority of LGBTQ+ individuals hide their identity in the workplace. While I have been fortunate enough to work in environments I consider more “enlightened” or perhaps more civil than others, the state of being exposed to the possibility of harm — whether physically, emotionally or psychologically — is very real for many. It’s a huge factor in whether people feel comfortable being out at work or not,” one of our members explains. Says another, “Sharing something so personal and not knowing how someone will react requires a component of vulnerability. There is the element of unknown that can create fear. It’s a powerful force for silence.”

Yet hiding one’s identity also requires vulnerability. “If individuals don’t feel safe enough to be their whole selves at work, it’s an extremely de-energizing, demoralizing and exhausting experience. It takes mental focus away from doing their work or excelling. I’ve heard folks say that LGBTQ+ people can choose to “hide” their real selves at work, but that stunts meaningful relationships from developing and isolates queer employees.”

Visibility and acceptance: the ability to be our true selves

When we feel safe in the workplace to be who we are — free from the need to self-censor and suppress major elements of ourselves and our lives — we are able to more fully connect and contribute. As one of our members says, “Being assured that varied identities and expressions of those identities are welcomed and given the space to thrive allows me to dive in with the best version of myself. Visibility translates into an open state of contributing all that I have to offer.”

The honesty and clarity of self that comes with visibility provides a platform for authentic interactions and relationships with others. “Being open about my relationship helps me be more frank and sincere in personal discussions with colleagues. It can be taxing to keep a portion of your life carefully hidden or edited out of conversations. This can also give others the sense that you’re not being forthcoming or are being deceitful.”

Feeling like you are the only person who is “different” increases the risks and sense of vulnerability of being visible. Conversely, when LGBTQ+ people are visible, especially in leadership roles, it can help others feel safe to be open about their identity. “Knowing that people with your same identity, whatever that is, have been able to succeed and attain the highest levels of responsibility in an organization can be really beneficial for helping you position yourself and be excited about where you sit in that organization too,” one of our members explains. Says another, “After being open about my sexual orientation, I’ve had over 200 employees reach out to me about their own sexual orientation or gender identity, many of whom were not open at the time. It’s amazing being able to help them through their own journey.”



Creating a safe place for visibility: what leaders and colleagues can do

Being visible requires vulnerability. Leaders, whether allies or members of the LGBTQ+ community themselves, are instrumental in creating a work environment that supports visibility and provides the foundation for the LGBTQ+ community to be seen, heard and, ultimately, included. And the visibility of the LGBTQ+ community is vital if our goal is to create spaces where all people can thrive.

Valuing diversity and modeling inclusive behaviors

Leaders can increase the sense of safety for members of the LGBTQ+ community by setting the tone that diversity is valued. They do this by modeling inclusive behaviors, using inclusive language, ensuring HR policies and talent programs represent the needs of everyone, and challenging offensive behavior and language. This may require leaders to lean into their own vulnerability — to consider their own biases and how they show up as leaders and to be open to learning more about other people’s experiences. Leaders can also create a sense of safety by donating to relevant causes and pulling support from organizations that seek to undermine visibility.

An important question for leaders today is how vocal and visible to be about external developments that threaten the LGBTQ+ community (or others), such as the rise in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. There is not one right response — some leaders may choose to publicly comment on specific legislation, while others may instead decide to focus on reinforcing the organization’s values — but, to members of the LGBTQ+ community, silence communicates indifference. “When leadership remains silent on current events that have a direct impact on you, your family and your community, the message that echoes through the silence is ‘We don’t care what happens outside of work hours.’ And maybe that’s fair, but it doesn’t cultivate a sense of belonging or care, but more of a transactional experience,” a member explains.

“I think it would be very easy for leaders to look at what’s happened to Disney in the wake of its criticism of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and get scared. It scares me!” adds another affinity group member. “But looking at the long-term, study after study tells us it’s better business to be inclusive and outwardly supportive, in spite of any short-term hurdles. Saying nothing or sweeping under the rug sends a far more negative message, effectively saying the bottom line is more important than our community’s struggles.”

Visible representation at all levels

It’s reassuring for us to know that we’re not alone in navigating the potential conflicts between our identity at work and in our personal lives. That’s why visible representation is so important, especially in leadership. “Leaders can create a safe space by hiring LGBTQ+ individuals, especially into leadership roles. In our society, we have biases that treat LGBTQ+ people as less professional or not as presentable in interactions with clients, customers and external stakeholders. It’s important to be aware of these biases and actively push against them by elevating LGBTQ+ voices into positions of visibility,” one affinity group member explains.

Many LGBTQ+ people also find safety in workplace affinity or employee resource groups, which can provide support and a sense of community — and normalcy — to members. “Having a few other people from the LGBTQ+ community opens up that discussion because you’re not in the total minority,” says one of our members.



Curiosity and communication

Leaders and others can create safety by signaling our support in our words and behavior — for example, by using inclusive language, sharing our preferred pronouns and avoiding making assumptions about others' identity, sexual orientation or family situation. “People openly talking about topics related to LGBTQ+ populations in a positive way matters. I also look for inclusive language to show me it’s safe to discuss who I am,” one of our members says. Adds another, “When getting to know someone, never assume. It’s always better to ask more open questions when it comes to sexuality. And when someone does come out to you, it’s best to react in the manner they did. If they were nonchalant, a nonchalant acknowledgement is fine. If someone sits you down one on one to more formally come out, have a moment to acknowledge them and thank them for sharing that with you.”

Other members encourage people to include their LGBTQ+ colleagues in personal conversations and not shy away because of their different experiences. “You can feel quite exposed when you don’t conform, and that’s all about the environment,” explains one of our members. It can signal a lack of acceptance when others choose not to engage their LGBTQ+ colleagues in the kinds of casual conversations about family and weekend activities they do their other colleagues — maybe because they are afraid to say the wrong thing or it feels uncomfortable because it’s unfamiliar — and this can make it harder for LGBTQ+ members to bring their whole selves to work.



Being visible requires vulnerability. Working together to create a work environment that supports visibility provides the foundation for the LGBTQ+ community to not just be seen, but ultimately to flourish and thrive. And the visibility of the LGBTQ+ community is vital if our goal is to create spaces where all people can thrive.



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This article was authored by the **North American LGBTQ+ Affinity Group** at Spencer Stuart

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