

## PERSPECTIVES ON PRACTICE

### **Perspective on Out & Equal Workplace Advocates Building Bridges Model: A Retrospect of the Past, Present, and Future of Training Impacting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Employees in the Workplace**

Pat Baillie  
Out & Equal Workplace Advocates

Julie Gedro  
Empire State College

As an introductory note, at this point in history, only the lesbian and gay communities were represented in these discussions. For the remainder of this essay, however, the use of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) will be used to represent the current communities discussed in the “Building Bridges” material.

As early as 1983, a group of LGBTs in the San Francisco Bay Area met with the United Way to discuss the needs of the community in the workplace. In 1986, the United Way authorized a board-level task force on LGBT issues, which looked at health and human care concerns. In 1987, a survey was conducted of the 246 United Way Bay Area agencies. Data from the study indicated that most agencies had no policies regarding LGBTs. The task force also discovered that LGBTs were underrepresented at all levels of the agencies. The task force proposed as a solution to these issues that an in-service LGBT sensitivity training be developed. In 1990, Building Bridges was formed as an organization to provide the sensitivity training for United Way Agencies. The term *Building Bridges* had historically been used by many groups in the diversity community to reflect inclusion and a deeper understanding of different groups. The United Way Building Bridges program marked the first connection of diversity work around the LGBT community.

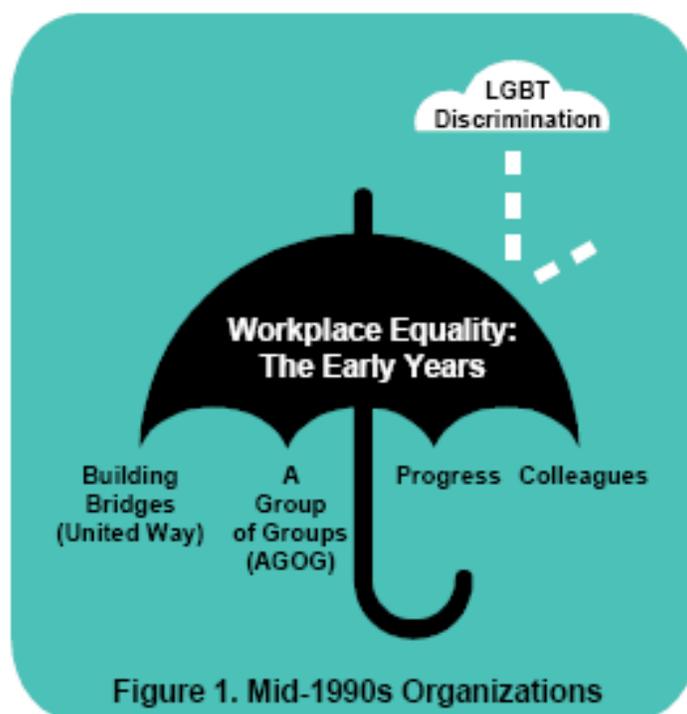
The goals of the original course (Out & Equal Workplace Advocates, 1996) were to generate change in workplace attitudes and practices and to provide an opportunity to:

1. Talk honestly about LGBT issues, on a personal level as well as on an agency level;
2. Learn some facts about LGBT people;
3. Discover the relationship of homophobia and heterosexism to other “power-over” relationships; and
4. Develop an agency action plan for meeting the needs of LGBT staff, board, volunteers and clients.

As the concept of LGBT employees in the workplace grew, corporations began to be asked to create and support internal Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). In the Bay Area, as the corporation ERGs grew, an organization called “A Group of Groups (AGOG)” formed in 1994 to provide networking opportunities between these new LGBT ERGs. Realizing that ERG groups were beginning to form nationwide, a group called “Progress” formed in 1995 to provide

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<http://education.fiu.edu/newhorizons>

leadership development resources and training at a national leadership summit for ERG leaders. At the same time, an additional organization, “Colleagues”, began producing another event called the Out & Equal Summit for human resources and LGBT employees. Building Bridges through the United Way, AGOG, and Progress and Colleagues represent the first generation of advocacy work for LGBT employees in the workplace. LGBT workplace equality was a new concept and these organizations provided resources. However, there was little coordination among these groups in and out of the workplace in the early days. Each originally felt they had a separate mission and constituency they were serving. Figure 1 below provides a pictorial of the historical trajectory during the 1990s of these organizations.



*Figure 1.* Mid-1990s organizations.

In 1996, the United Way hired Selisse Berry as the director of the United Way Building Bridges training program. As awareness of LGBT employees grew, the administrative and program issues for all of the groups grew as well. Berry was familiar with members in each of the groups and invited them to begin conversations with each other. Berry also realized that for Building Bridges to stay viable, she needed to include the major corporations. Because the only full time staff position was Berry’s at the United Way, she was able to continue working with AGOG and Progress; and in 1998, Building Bridges, AGOG, and Progress merged to form the Pride Collaborative. In 1999, Progress’s Leadership Summit and Colleagues Out & Equal Conference combined resources to hold a joint event in Atlanta, Georgia. At this point, all the groups merged into one umbrella organization that brought together the best elements of each group.

The new “Out & Equal Workplace Advocates” was funded under the United Way and directed by Berry. This step was a catalyst for growth in expanding the Building Bridges course

into the corporate sector. Additionally, the Annual Summit became the primary event for human resource (HR) professionals and Employee Resource Groups to convene and continue their collaborative efforts to create workplace equality. By 2001, Out & Equal was so successful that additional staff was needed. In 2004, the connection with United Way ended as Out & Equal became its own 501(c) 3 organization although it still shared an office with United Way. In 2006, Out & Equal left the United Way offices and currently is based in San Francisco with 18 employees and a growing outreach including training, the Annual Summit, professional networks, and career development departments that work with businesses across the country.

### **Impact of the Building Bridges Course**

Starting in 2001, Out & Equal began teaching the Building Bridges model nationally. Building Bridges is a workplace training that provides sensitivity and awareness around LGBT issues. An expanded course called “Train the Trainer” was developed for facilitators to be able to take Out & Equal Diversity Leadership materials into their own workplace and host smaller discussion groups. Both classes have been taught at the Annual Summit in conjunction with Out & Equal Regional Affiliate events and at individual companies at the local or national headquarters level.

There are a variety of companies that have taken the Building Bridges courses over the years. Table 1 below shows a cross section of companies, representing an array of industries that have initiated policy and created change to ensure workplace equality for LGBT employees.

Table 1

*Companies Taking Building Bridges*

2001 - 2006	2007	Projected 2008
Adam’s Mark Hotel	DC regional affiliate	Southern California regional affiliate
Boeing	Dallas regional affiliate	affiliated
Footlocker	Hallmark	New York regional affiliates
Hyatt	Boeing	
US Dept of the Interior Schwab	Best Buy	Tualatin Fire Department
PricewaterhouseCoopers	MetLife	ReachOut USA (Social Services)
	Accenture	
ING	Rocketdyne	
JC Penney	Diversity Matters	
Johnson & Johnson	State Farm Insurance	
Motorola	Ernst & Young	
AT&T	Disney	
IBM	Pepsi Co	
NCR	Pfizer	
Lucent	US EPA	
Wal-Mart	Highmark	
	Cargill Inc	
	Gap Inc	

Note: Adapted from “Out & Equal Workplace Advocates”, 2008a, 2008b.

The shift from providing in-service training for non-profits to the current corporate training model has had a direct impact on the Fortune 500 companies working to create an inclusive workplace. Attendance at the early conferences averaged 100-200, as ERG members and HR personnel would attend and bring the Building Bridges course materials and philosophy back into their workplace. Over the years, companies used the action plan section of the Building Bridges training to create ways to include sexual orientation in workplace non-discrimination policies. As the community grew to include the bisexual and transgender communities, Building Bridges evolved to include gender identity and gender expression and began working with companies to find ways to include domestic partner benefits. The awareness gained through the Building Bridges course of the impact of “staying in the closet” has continued to help businesses make the connection between productivity and inclusion.

There are two key measures that reflect the effectiveness of the Building Bridges model from 2001 to today. The first metric is the increase in the number of companies that have added workplace non-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation and gender identity. Companies are evaluated on the Corporate Equality Index (CEI). The CEI, released annually, provides an in-depth analysis and rating of United States employers and their policies and practices relating to LGBT employees and customers (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2009). In 2002, only 13 companies scored 100% on the CEI. The latest report for 2009 shows the total has now grown to 259 major corporations. This is a 19-fold increase in just 6 years! Over 75% of these corporations have attended Building Bridges training over the years. The course presents a clear and concise understanding of the business case for hiring, retaining, and promoting LGBT employees. These principles guide companies’ understanding of how inclusive policies can improve their business from the employees’ and customers’ perspectives.

The second metric that demonstrates the growing and continuing need for this kind of education, networking, and discussion is reflected in the Out & Equal Workplace Summit attendance growth. In 2004, the Annual Summit was attended by approximately 400 HR and ERG members. In 2008, Summit attendance grew to 2600 attendees. This 7-fold increase in just 4 years indicates corporate interest in workplace equality. According to VS Communications, conference attendance is declining in many other sectors (Kovaleski, 2008). However, companies looking for ways to improve around diversity issues are attending the Out & Equal Summit. According to the 2008 Out & Equal Summit Report (Out & Equal Workplace Advocates, 2008a), 370 companies were represented. In fact, many companies plan to bring most of their HR departments and LGBT ERG members. In 2008, 6 companies brought 70+ attendees. In addition to taking the Building Bridges or Train-the-Trainer courses and attending over 100 workshops on LGBT-related topics and research, these companies met with their employees to discuss strategic planning around LGBT workplace equality.

The course description for Building Bridges has evolved as the issues and focus have changed over the years. The current description is still designed to change the hearts and minds of participants on LGBT employees in the workplace. Here are the current course description and performance outcomes:

Building Bridges toward LGBT Diversity is designed to help employers get the most from their employees, LGBT and non-LGBT. This training fosters increased awareness

to develop healthier, safer and more productive workplaces. The course increases the level of comfort for all attendees and improves communication between LGBT and non-LGBT employees and their customers. (Out & Equal Workplace Advocates, 2008b, p. 5)

By the end of the workshops, participants will be able to:

- State the significance of LGBT identity in the context of broader diversity issues
- Evaluate myths and stereotypes that others have about people who identify LGBT
- Discuss the impact of homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and heterosexism on workplace and customer relationships
- Be familiar with the steps to becoming an ally to the LGBT community and workplace equality
- Generate a personal or organizational action plan to improve cultural climate for LGBT employees and customers. (Out & Equal Workplace Advocates, 2008b, p. 5)

### **Personal Perspective from a Trainer (Julie Gedro)**

When Building Bridges went national, I responded to the invitation to apply for certification. I attended the training certification that was held in Seattle at the Out & Equal Summit. I have proudly conducted the training in a variety of industries and locations and, most recently, conducted the train-the-trainer workshop for approximately 60 participants at the 2007 Out and Equal Workplace Summit in Washington, D.C. The train the trainer program is generally a day-long program that traverses the material and permits trainees to practice the segments of the program.

Building Bridges is a model for LGBT diversity training that has been continually refined over the course of its 7-year life. It is portable, scalable, and customizable. The pedagogy of the training is to begin with a particular strategy of putting a face on LGBT diversity; present data, facts, and figures related to LGBT workplace issues; and then to focus on the needs of the particular organization hosting the training. Trainers share their own personal stories of being LGBT. These personal stories create a training environment that helps learners to connect, in an individual and non-threatening way, with the material. The introduction of the training program also provides participants with a rationale, or “why we’re here today;” gently and effectively moves the content from the personal and individual to discursive deconstruction of LGBT terminology; and then moves the content to an overview of employment laws and protections affecting LGBT people today. Finally, the program shifts strategically to a focus on the particular organization with what is called the “internal scan.”

I have found this training model to be world-class and have experienced, time and again, the transformative effects of those who attend the training program. I believe that the model is effective not only because it flows in a way that allows for *content* to be disseminated, but also because it is presented with grace and compassion for learner, trainer, and other stakeholders. The material is not confrontational. Rather, it is dialogical. Learners have the opportunity to ask questions and confront their own fears and prejudices within the scope of the training. One exercise within the program that I have found to be particularly powerful is the one in which

participants are given a category, such as lesbian, and then asked to provide every slang term, every epithet, every stereotype, and every phrase that they have ever thought or heard about the category. The trainer then writes the responses from the participants on a whiteboard. After participants have finished providing their input, the trainer then unpacks each of the phrases or words and asks provocative questions, such as “Are all lesbians really man-haters?” “Do all lesbians really have short hair?” “Are all gay men effeminate?” This exercise is powerful for two fundamental reasons. One, it de-mystifies the discourse of LGBT. By explicitly discussing what might otherwise be seen as topics that cannot be discussed in polite organizational life, participants have the opportunity to engage in authentic dialogue and inquiry about the negative personal and organizational effects of homophobic language and destructive stereotyping. Two, it allows participants to become comfortable asking questions about LGBT people and their perspectives and experiences. The very act of having participants say aloud and in unison, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender* helps learners become comfortable with the subject matter. LGBT people, as I have written and presented in other academic and corporate venues, have historically been invisible in organizational America. Building Bridges transforms the invisible to the visible and helps make discussable what could not be talked about within an organization.

### **Building Bridges – The Future**

Continuing to work with companies, especially Fortune 500 corporations, to include sexual orientation and gender identity/expression protections in the workplace is still the primary goal for Out & Equal. For those companies who already have inclusive policies, a comprehensive needs analysis is under way to determine their future training needs. One important factor that has been discovered is that despite policies and procedures many LGBT employees still feel that the workplace is not safe for them (e.g., see Out & Equal Workplace Advocate, 2008c). There is an Out & Equal initiative to develop a climate survey tool to measure the attitudes and actual workplace environment. This in-depth evaluation will provide corporations with a benchmark on their diversity work progress and help identify areas of additional training to change the climate in the United States.

With the growth of global corporations, there is also a growing demand for using the Building Bridges model in a multi-cultural, multi-national workplace. Translating the principles of the course and maintaining respect for cultural differences will provide a unique set of challenges for Out & Equal. Working with companies to facilitate discussions about LGBT employees with employees from Middle Eastern countries versus Scandinavian cultures is an emerging target market for the Building Bridges program.

There is also a growing awareness that there are LGBT employees in other workplaces, not just corporations. Sectors such as health, social services, academia, military, police and fire service, unions, and government are all beginning to have discussion about inclusion and protections for LGBT employees. Congressional actions in 2007 indicate that a United States federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) providing protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression is imminent. Representative Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and the only lesbian in the U.S. House of Representatives, predicted in June 2008 that it would have a better chance of passing in 2009 (Johnson, 2008). When these laws are mandated,

organizations will want to incorporate the best-case practices from Fortune 500 corporations to streamline their compliance with the new laws. In many ways, this approach returns Building Bridges to its roots of providing positive educational experiences to non-profits and smaller organizations. Tailoring the Building Bridges program to use the language, examples, and concerns of these various sectors is a new initiative for Out & Equal in 2008.

The use of technology in training is also being explored. The emerging web technology 2.0 may be a way to harness the strengths of the Building Bridges model and present it to a larger audience in timely, cost-effective ways. Building Bridges uses personal experience and stories to represent LGBT employee issues and concerns and to share their perceptions of the workplace. The course could easily be modularized using the best of these stories and using the web as a virtual classroom. Finding the balance between technology and maintaining the personal aspect in the training is vital to keeping the core of the course viable.

There is also a continuing need for research and data to expand the business case discussion for workplace equality. Most research presented in the current Building Bridges course is based on mid-1990 studies. The culture, issues, and workplace environment have changed radically since the early 1990s. Questions are now asked about the hiring, retention, promotion, and retirement rates for LGBT employees. The need for research using case studies, larger sample sizes, and evaluation of the last 10 years of changes is vital for building the business case for LGBT inclusion in the workplace.

### **Conclusion**

The Building Bridges model has been used for almost 20 years and has stayed relevant and been a powerful tool for change in the workplace. As society moves forward to inclusion of LGBT community members in all aspects of life, the ability to update and change the Building Bridges model can be a tool to maintain a dialogue on the issues.

The ability to present facts and concepts while tailoring the course to specific sectors, issues, and groups provides a standardized methodology for training. Using action plans and discussion allows a more in-depth understanding of the material and permits the learner to ask questions that deepen familiarity with the topics. The model is keeping pace with technology, but providing the human story is how hearts and mind are changed--no matter the sector, age, or issue. Building Bridges methodology is adaptable to other areas of diversity and can provide an engaging, informative, and transformative opportunity to look at our underlying assumptions about the LGBT community.

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