PERSPECTIVES ON PRACTICE

A Place at the Table?
The Organization of a Pre-Conference Symposium on LGBT Issues in HRD

Steven W. Schmidt
Assistant Professor
Department of Counselor and Adult Education
East Carolina University

Rod P. Githens
Assistant Professor
Department of Leadership, Foundations, and Human Resource Education
University of Louisville

The idea for a pre-conference session focusing on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues in human resource development (HRD) seemed an appropriate topic for an international conference on HRD. The LGBT rights movement has been closely linked with the world of work and the opportunities made available through shifts from an agrarian economy (see D'Emilio, 1993; Foucault, 1978). The modern gay rights movement started in 1969, when patrons of a New York gay bar, The Stonewall Inn, fought back after a routine police raid (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1997). The riots that resulted from this raid launched the modern demand for LGBT rights. In the years since 1969, unprecedented gains in this movement have resulted in awareness and acceptance in many venues and situations, including workplaces. Policies banning discrimination based on sexual orientation have appeared at state, local, and organizational levels. More companies than ever offer domestic partner benefits, and LGBT employee groups (e.g., affinity networks) have formed within many organizations. However, as is the case with many movements, change does not come easily. In her observation of the gay rights movement as a whole, Hornsby (2006) notes that these changes have resulted in backlash and fear. The resulting conflict is apparent in many places, including workplaces. In response to this conflict, Hornsby (2006) recommends a strong foundation of LGBT-friendly policies in the workplace to both protect individuals and foster inclusion. However, efforts to promote this protection and inclusion can be difficult. The purpose of this essay is to illustrate the difficulties that can be associated with civil and workplace rights movements, as experienced by organizers of a pre-conference on LGBT workplace issues.

The two of us, along with two other colleagues proposed a pre-conference for the 2008 Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) International Research Conference. The proposal addressed several topics within the realm of LGBT employee issues, including career development, mentoring, inclusion in workplaces, and employee groups. It was organized as a session for students, practitioners, and researchers. Participants would leave the session with a better understanding of the importance of sexual minority inclusion in organizations, practical knowledge about how to address organizational development and training needs related to the

challenges of sexual minority inclusion, and specifics on career development and mentoring to meet the needs of sexual minorities in workplaces, among other topics. The pre-conference would feature multiple presenters from higher education, business, and LGBT advocacy organizations, along with a variety of activities designed to meet the pre-conference's goals.

The Initial Review

The proposal was sent for review, and as is often the case with topics that some view as controversial, reviewer comments were across the board. Some felt that the proposed session was extremely important and the topic was necessary to address. Those reviewers pointed to the need for inclusion and understanding of different groups and the timeliness of the topic to those in HRD. Others were less than enthused. One reviewer wondered if this topic was one that AHRD wanted to promote that particular year. Another, who admitted having limited knowledge of the topic, questioned its importance to conference attendees. In the end, the proposal was accepted, but the specific topic was still an issue. We were strongly encouraged to expand the session's focus to cover a broad range of workforce diversity topics and not focus on LGBT issues. In doing so, it was thought that the session would appeal to a broader spectrum of potential attendees.

The Case for an LGBT-Specific Pre-Conference

We were surprised to receive this reaction from an organization that prides itself on being at the forefront of HRD research and practice. Most of us in HRD espouse the importance of creating workplace environments that are inclusive and inviting to everyone. Employees can maximize their potential and their contribution to the organization only when they are not hindered by discrimination and prejudice. Because HRD professionals are often in visible organizational roles, we are involved in the shaping of policy and practice that affect all minority groups in the workplace.

Although there are common issues shared by all employees of diverse backgrounds, each dimension of diversity has its own history that has resulted in unique sets of issues. The specific struggles that each minority group faces cannot be fully addressed in a 4-hour meeting on "workplace diversity." For example, issues related to disclosure of sexual orientation or gender identity in the workplace can be very difficult for some LGBT workers. Other dimensions of diversity are more visible. Employees with visible diversity characteristics may not deal with issues of disclosure, but instead may face other complicated issues. Although the broad concept of "diversity" is a productive and worthwhile construct, there are also occasions in which group-specific issues need to be explored, as is evidenced by the proliferation of employee resource groups and affinity groups in workplaces throughout the United States.

The gay rights movement has progressed extremely quickly in the 40-year period since Stonewall. When the conference was originally planned in 2007, statistics showed that LGBT issues in the workplace were being addressed by more organizations each day. *Fortune* magazine reported that as of June 2006, "more than half of the Fortune 500 companies; 263 to be precise offered health benefits for domestic partners. Ten years ago, only 28 did" (Gunther, 2006, September 20). The 2007 Human Rights Campaign Foundation Corporate Equality Index, which

rates employees on a scale of 0 to 100% on their treatment of LGBT employees, recognized 195 major businesses as having earned the top rating of 100% for the year. That number was a 41% increase over the previous year and far above the 13 companies that scored 100% in 2002, the year the index was first released (HRC Corporate Equality Index, 2007, p. 12).

Despite these initiatives and growing attention paid to sexual minorities in workplaces, research on these issues is only starting to take shape. Some might argue that issues surrounding minority populations in the workplace are outside the scope of HRD. However, the field of HRD has begun to address issues of critical inquiry, equality, and social justice (e.g., Bierma, in press; Fenwick, 2005; Valentin, 2006), and LGBT workplace issues are certainly applicable to those topics. Knowledge of issues that minority employees of all dimensions face is a critical component of HRD in all organizations. Interest in LGBT issues in the workplace should not be limited to LGBT employees. In the end, workplaces in which differences are celebrated benefit all in the organization. Everyone in HRD has a responsibility to be aware of their roles in the creation and nurturing of those environments in which everyone, of all dimensions of diversity, feels valued and welcome.

Ultimately, we decided not to change the focus of the preconference session. We kept the focus on LGBT issues in the workplace and made a case that sexual minority issues in workplaces are specific enough to warrant its own forum. Conference organizers expressed disappointment that we did not follow their advice and were concerned about the limited interest of the topic. Pre-conference sessions were expected to be profitable, which was somewhat of a change from previous years. Organizers believed our event would be difficult to promote and thought that a more general diversity focus would draw more attendees.

The Result

In the end, the LGBT pre-conference drew the highest attendance of any pre-conference held that year. Attendees were students, practitioners, and educators. According to a post-conference survey, about 50% identified themselves as LGBT and 50% did not. Participants were of all ages and from various countries. They all found the conference meeting room, despite the fact that our pre-conference session name was changed on the signage to the more generic name "Workforce Diversity." Despite the conference organizers' fears, participants had a common interest in the subject matter and understood its importance in today's workplace. Feedback from participants indicated a positive overall experience. According to the post-conference survey, participants left the pre-conference interested in reading, supporting, and conducting research on LGBT workplace issues. Additionally, several important suggestions for future research emerged, including:

- Research on LGBT employees of color
- Comparative studies of nondiscrimination policies in various industrial sectors
- Effect of domestic partner benefits on employee recruitment
- Economic consequences of discriminatory federal policies
- Sexual orientation and its effect on employee engagement
- Use and non-use of work-life benefits by LGBT employees

Participants suggested future pre-conferences and AHRD sessions in which researchers and practitioners could collaborate to develop research projects and research agendas.

Conclusions

Cultural competence is defined by Schim, Doorenbos, and Borse (2006) as "the demonstration of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors based on diverse, relevant cultural experiences. It is the incorporation of personal cultural diversity experience, awareness, and sensitivity into practice" (p. 303). Those behaviors, they believe, are "based on personal exposure, experience with people from diverse groups, and awareness of individual and group similarities and differences" (p. 303). Sometimes those attempts to provide this exposure, experience, and knowledge are not easy. The difficulties we encountered in organizing this preconference may have been the result of lack of understanding, lack of interest, different priorities, financial concerns, or a host of other reasons. Regardless of reason, the fact that ours was the largest preconference that year is a testament to the fact that those in HRD are seeking this knowledge, are interested in understanding, and are working to become culturally competent with regard to LGBT issues in the workplace. In staying true to our initial vision, we were able to share our knowledge with a variety of our AHRD colleagues on a topic that has received little attention within HRD. In attracting the largest number of pre-conference attendees, we sent a clear message to the AHRD leadership about this topic's relevance to members. LGBT-related topics in HRD continue to be presented at AHRD conferences. An interactive session on the topic at the 2009 AHRD International Research Conference was also well attended, and several participants shared their research projects that grew out of the 2008 pre-conference.

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