



Alternative Lifestyles

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## Things 'to' Say to LGBT Coworkers (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender)



By Daryl C. Hannah

Ask anyone who has come out at work and they'll tell you--it's not easy. But it's especially difficult if you work with people who are likely to say the [7 Things NEVER to Say to LGBT Coworkers](#).

"When coming out, one is always prone to anxiety," says PricewaterhouseCoopers executive Stephanie Peel. PricewaterhouseCoopers is No. 4 on [The DiversityInc Top 50 Companies for Diversity® list](#). "I came out personally in 1997 and came out professionally in 1999. Fortunately, I never heard anything not positive, but that is not the case for many people who come out."

While more straight people are advocating for equal workplace rights for LGBT coworkers these days, many don't know how to welcome a coworker who has recently come out of the closet.

"More leaders and managers in the firm ask me, more than anyone else, what are good things to say when an employee comes out or is gay. I always encourage them to put themselves in the other person's shoes," says Peel.

Selisse Berry, executive director for Out & Equal, advises such managers to be open about being unsure of what is appropriate to say in these circumstances. "People respect people when they admit to not knowing much," says Berry. "It may be better to acknowledge your own ignorance."

In DiversityInc's [Things Never to Say](#) series, we've given plenty of examples of insensitive comments to avoid. Now we are turning the tables and offering advice on some things to be mindful of when talking to LGBT coworkers. Here are some suggestions for opening a pathway to better communication with your LGBT coworkers:

### **Thank you for feeling comfortable enough to tell me.**

Saying "thank you" when someone first tells you he or she is gay removes any type of judgment from your response, says Peel. "I think any response other than 'thank you' may come across as uncertain and may ring hollow. It's a welcoming response," she explains.

A simple "thank you" is the appropriate alternative to saying "I suspected you might be gay" or, worse, "I'm sorry."

"You shouldn't say 'I'm sorry,' just as you wouldn't apologize for someone's ethnicity or someone's gender," says Berry.

### **What pronoun should I use when referring to you?**

Questions about transgender people or people in transition can be difficult. But if you are genuinely interested or inquisitive, the best thing to do is approach the person and ask, says Berry. "Own your own discomfort or unfamiliarity," she says. "Be honest about your feelings and admit it if you have never had an opportunity to talk to a person transitioning."

### **I feel very comfortable around you.**

"I don't consider you gay" is a phrase sometimes used by well-meaning people to express their level of comfort with an LGBT person. But this is not a sensitive way of expressing those good feelings, warns Peel. She says, "There is no good interpretation that a GLBT person can take from that comment." Instead, simply say what you mean, whether it's "I like you," "I feel comfortable around you," or "I'd like to be friends with you," she advises.

Acknowledging the bond that you share with your LGBT coworker is the best way to express your looking "beyond the fact that they are gay." Articulating that bond is also a great way of showing that you are LGBT-friendly and accepting of your coworker's orientation.

### **How was your weekend?**

Including LGBT coworkers in the "weekend conversations" allows for open communication and is a way to encourage LGBT coworkers to bring their "whole selves" to the office. "The weekend conversation is a great gateway for straight allies to demonstrate that they are supportive of an inclusive culture," says Peel, who adds that what you say is not as important as showing that you are interested and open to hearing about your coworker's life outside of work.

It's as simple as asking a coworker, "How was your weekend?" If straight coworkers have LGBT people in their family, Berry says it's a good idea to "bring it up, bring that into your weekend conversation," as a way of making a connection.

## Readers' Comments

Posted: Friday, Aug 08, 2008  
Things 'to' Say to LGBT

I was pleased to see the articles on what 'not' to say to some folks, but I'm baffled by the string of things "TO" say to others. Why don't we simply treat every other human being decently & with respect? No lines need to be drawn between race, color, gender, sexual orientation, etc., at work. I draw the line on 'worker' vs 'do-nothing'. I started years ago to just assume people would get used to the fact that I am a lesbian, and always brought my weekend activity, etc. into conversations. Maybe I have been lucky, but I've found that folks get used to it pretty quickly. They find they have no gossip to spread if you spread it yourself first. After finding a newspaper article about my partner & myself anonymously displayed without our permission, I started bringing in every article written about our civic activities, plus pictures! They want to see one--they can see them all! It worked!

Linda Amendt

Posted: Friday, Aug 08, 2008  
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All i know is, i have a right to talk about what i did over the weekend with my partner as much as I hear Str8 people talk about their children, churches and what they did over the weekend. Why can't people just communicate with normal conversations? Why does it have to be different?

Joe Campbell

Posted: Friday, Aug 08, 2008  
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I agree with the other positive comments, as an advocate for diversity within the company I work for and in the community at-large, I have preferred the do's over the don't. Where most bigotry comes from ignorance, uncomfortably comes from lack of education, if we treat people in a positive educational way they tend to be more accepting. So thank you for supplying the readers with more positive educational tools.

I do take acceptation to comment made by another reader above, all gay men don't look feminine just as all straight men don't look masculine. Could the image be a metrosexual man, the other stereotypical response is to assume because he has a feminine look he must be gay.

The point to all the diversity work we do is to remove all the judgmental statements and views from society, the only time someone should be interested in someone else's orientation is if they are interested in pursuing an interest in that person. Otherwise it should be based on there moral, ethical fibers combined with personality, commitment to a common cause or such things as that, but NEVER based upon there look, orientation, disabilities or abilities for that

matter.

i view the image at the top of the article as purely advertizing and representative of nothing more.

Tom Carlock

Posted: Friday, Aug 08, 2008  
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I think another important thing for people to say is that, assuming you had a good relationship before, you look forward to that continuing and hopefully become even better. The degree of honesty required to come out, and have that realization being well received, should work to strengthen a relationship.

Don Hopings

Posted: Friday, Aug 08, 2008  
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I enjoyed reading the article. Often times we focus on the negative aspects of communicating across differences. This article teaches us what are the appropriate phrases to use in a positive way. We cannot overstate the importance of communicating effectively. It is fundamental to building robust relationships at work, which lead to a more satisfied and engaged workforce. Well done.

Raymond Arroyo