Strategy Development to Support LGB Individuality in the Workplace

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Abstract

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals are challenged daily regarding the lack of emotional support from employers in acknowledging cultural differences. The LGB population is at high risk for heterosexist discrimination despite new employment laws that protect individuals from termination based on sexual orientation. Previously completed research indicated that LGB employees who felt supported emotionally in the workplace showed a higher rate of future employee recruitment, increased productivity, quick adjustment periods for new employees, decreased stress, and were committed to their agency. The purpose of this research study was to develop strategies to help the LGB population feel supported in the workplace. The strategies were identified from anonymous surveys completed by employees in the developmental disability support field. The study participants are members of the *Advancing Strong Leadership* program for North Carolina Developmental Disability (DD) Professionals. Participants shared their personal perceptions of how supportive their agency is for the LGB population. The results showed that 86.36% of the survey participants felt a change could be made to their agency to help increase support and acceptance for LGB employees. There were 16.6% of the employees that identified as LGB

from public and non-profit agencies. The results suggest strategies for improving agency climate for LGB workers.

Keywords: employment support, LGB

Introduction

The Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) population just had a milestone ruling by the Supreme Court of the United States: allowing same-sex couples to be wed in all fifty states (Liptak, 2015). However, discrimination and victimization in the workplace for LGB individuals still exists. In Katz-Wise and Hyde's (2012) study, they determined there continues to be an "increase of LGB victimization in the workplace over time" (p. 157). In an effort to help LGB individuals feel accepted by their workplace and ban formal and heterosexist discrimination in the work force, policy makers proposed enactment of the Employment Nondiscrimination Act (ENDA) in the 1990s (Martell, 2014, p. 562). Despite valiant efforts from ENDA, twenty-eight states do not protect the LGB population from employment discrimination and are still not accepted by their workplace as representing a diverse population (Martell, 2014, p. 560).

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) determined that the following groups are federally protected from discrimination: age, disability, national origin, race/color, pregnancy, religion, and sex (2014). LGB employees can be shielded by the protected sex discrimination group due to alleged sex-stereotyping; however, using this argument is discretionary, based on the qualities of the discrimination claim (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2014). Despite this law being enforced by the EEOC, sexual orientation is not accepted and supported by all employers (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2014; Velez and Moradi, 2012).

Previous research has shown that workplace acceptance and climate can make a positive impact for LGB employees (Liddle, Luzzo, Huenstein, & Schuck, 2004, p. 33). Employers that support and accept LGB employees are more likely to recruit employees who identify as LGB, experience a quicker adjustment period for new LGB employees, and experience increased productivity and less stress from LGB employees (Liddle et al., 2004, p. 33). LGB employees who work in supportive employment organizations demonstrate a strong commitment to their agency (Liddle, et al., 2004). Two other results from an inclusive workplace include positive mental and physical health outcomes (Velez and Moradi, 2012, p. 399).

Literature Review and Relevant Theory of Change

Now that it is legal for all same-sex couples to marry in the United States, employers need to keep up with the increasing policy changes relevant to LGB employees. This includes equal support and acceptance as an employee, acknowledgment and celebration of differences, spousal benefits, and the development of the human resource department in promoting equality (Kuyper, 2015). Research is needed to better understand how to best enact these resources to support LGB employees.

There has been little research completed on the topic of support and acceptance for LGB employees (McFadden, 2015, p. 134). However, since 2008, there have been at least 25 articles published per year regarding the LGB workplace (McFadden, 2015, p. 134). Elisaon and colleagues (2011) reviewed survey data to help determine how nurses who identify as LGBTQ experienced equality in hospitals in which they worked (p.239). The study reported that out of 261 nurses that responded to the survey, 70% of the nurses who were "out" to their workplace, family, friends, coworkers, and patients reported that their employer was LGBTQ friendly (Eliason, DeJoseph, Dibble, Deevey & Chinn, 2011). There were several different factors considered to make the agency more inclusive and "friendly" to the LGBTQ population (Eliason et al., 2011). These factors included: "overall diversity of the community and prevalence of LGBTQ in all spheres of the community environment, government, and infrastructure" (Eliason et al., 2011, p. 239). Demands were also made to the employer by the LGBTQ staff for sensitivity, openness, and relevancy (Eliason et al., p. 239). These demands included: "facility-specific contributions, such as inclusive language; LGBTQ-positive policies, such as domestic partner benefits and covering the children of domestic partners; and specific hiring policies that did not discriminate against sexual orientation" (Eliason et al., 2011, p. 239). Evidence provided by the survey showed that the majority of the LGBTQ individuals felt accepted and supported by their employer, which made their work experience very positive (Eliason et al, 2011).

Degges-White & Shoffner (2002) suggest that the Theory of Work Adjustment explains job satisfaction as the degree to which a person feels they fit into their work role based on person-environment (P-E) fit and person-organization (P-O) fit. Day and Schoenrade (1997) also suggest "that levels of outness seem to predict job satisfaction, such that those LGB employees who are 'closeted' at work are also less satisfied with their jobs than those who are 'out'" (as cited in Lyons, Brenner, & Fassinger, 2005, p. 537). "Employees are typically satisfied with their work environments when the values

that they possess related to work (e.g., need for compensation) correspond with the reinforcements offered by their work environments (e.g. salary, benefits); with greater needs correspondence, employees would most likely report higher job satisfaction" (Lyons, Brenner, & Fassinger, 2005, p. 538). For LGB employees, job satisfaction (P-O fit perceptions) was diminished when employees experienced informal heterosexism (Lyons, Brenner, & Fassinger, 2005, p. 539). Other elements of the P-O fit include: "Equitable pay, good relationships with coworkers, and advancement opportunities" (Degges-White & Shoffner, 2002, p. 89). The employee's level of "outness" also influences the degree of P-O fit (Degges-White & Shoffner, 2002, p. 89).

Finally, support and acceptance in the workplace can help decrease LGB victimization. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (2009) stated " in 2008 law enforcement agencies in the United States reported that there were 9,691 victims of hate crimes, 17.6% of whom were targeted because of a bias against a particular sexual orientation" (as cited by Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2012, p. 142). "In most nations around the world, victimization based on sexual orientation takes place within the context of heterosexism and heteronormativity in which, heterosexuality is considered the norm" (Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2012, p. 143). Heterosexuality may still be considered the "norm" in today's world. However, no matter the gender, sexual orientation, color of skin, or disability, being a supported and accepted individual is more important than being "normal".

Methodology

To further the research regarding support and acceptance in the workplace for LGB employees, a survey was presented to the Advancing Strong Leadership for North Carolina DD Professionals and their mentors associated with the program. This study examines the following question: "What are the strategies that create a supportive work environment and promote acceptance in the workplace for LGB individuals?" Survey results will suggest specific strategies that promote acceptance and support for LGB employees.

Sample

The available participants included 28 Advancing Strong Leadership for North Carolina DD Professional participants, 28 mentors for the Advancing Strong Leadership program, and six participants through The National Leadership Consortium on Developmental Disabilities with the University of Delaware. All of the research participants worked with individuals that experience developmental disabilities in different areas of social services. Each participant's agency differs in employment size, location in North Carolina, and tax status. Twenty-two surveys were completed for a 35% return rate.

Measures

A new, 14-question survey was developed based on the findings of prior research on factors that influence job satisfaction (Prati & Pietrantoni, 2014; see appendix for the complete survey). The survey included several components to help identify employees' perceptions of acceptance and support in the workplace for LGB employees. Initial survey questions are general and about the friendliness of the work environment. Subsequent questions ask participants to be more critical in their analysis of the work environment and questions begin to be specific about LGB employees. The survey participant is asked to list up to three strategies that they would recommend to help make culturally diverse employees feel included in their agency. Culturally diverse employees were defined as "people of color, women, men, elders, etc." A 5-point Likert-type scale (1-Clearly does not describe my feelings to 5-Clearly describes my feelings) was provided to examine agency culture. These questions were derived from the work of Prati and Pietrantoni (2014).

Quantitative and qualitative response frequencies were analyzed in Microsoft Excel. Demographic data averages, and standard deviations were also calculated for survey participants. In order to protect respondent identities and to assure anonymity, the survey was developed using Qualtrics software, a web-based survey tool. The resulting data was downloaded as a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet once the survey time-frame had passed.

Procedure

The survey link was distributed via email to 62 members of the Advancing Strong Leadership for North Carolina DD Professionals. The participants were informed about the survey during the May 2015 Leadership Meeting. The participants had the ability to complete the survey between June 1st and June 12th 2015. The survey was to be completed independently without any other collaboration. On average, it took a participant eight minutes and three seconds to complete the survey. Survey completions ranged

from two minutes and 34 seconds to 15 minutes and 38 seconds. The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Institutional Review Board approved the study methods.

Results

Participant demographic data is reported in Table 1. It is interesting to note that 16.6% of the participants from a public social services agency and 12.5% from a private social services agency identified as LGB. This is a high percentage of LGB employees for a small sample group. The participants are diverse and well educated. Fifty percent of the respondents have graduate degrees. A majority (n=12) of the participants worked at a public agency and 27% (n=6) of the respondents worked at a private, non-profit agency. Two of the participants did not provide information about their agency type.

Table 1

Demographics Of Advancing Strong Leadership Participants

Variables (N=22)	Public Agency (12)	Private Agency (8)
More than 50 employees	63.6% (n=7)	75.0% (n=6)
Age (in years)	Mean=35.9	Mean=41.4
	SD=10.2	SD=11.5
Female	83.3% (n=10)	75.0% (n=6)
Participants of Color	16.6% (n=2)	12.5% (n=1)
LGB	16.6% (n=2)	12.5% (n=1)
Graduate Education	50.0% (n=6)	50.0% (n=4)

Table 2 shows that 86% (n=19) of the participants felt that their agency should make a change to be more supportive of their LGB coworkers and employees. Table 2, reports the responses to the questions using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1-clearly does not describe my feelings to 5-clearly describes my feelings). Due to the small sample size, ratings of 1 and 2 were combined as well as 4 and 5. Most of the results reflect a supportive work environment. However, nearly half of the respondents (n=9) did not feel that coworkers advocated for LGB employees. Most of the respondents had an opinion and few of the participants selected a neutral rating (n=3).

Table 2

Feelings of Support with Diversity in the Workplace

Variables (N=22)	Rating Frequency (%)		
Feel changes can be made		86.36% (n=19)	
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Prejudice exists	81.82% (n=18)	13.64% (n=3)	4.55% (n=1)
Safety and well-being protected	4.55% (n=1)	9.09% (n=2)	86.36 (n=19)
People are treated the same, regardless of their cultural diversity or sexual identity	9.09% (n=2)	9.09% (n=2)	81.82% (n=18)
Indirect discrimination for LGB	68.18% (n=15)	13.64% (n=3)	18.18% (n=4)
Homophobic phrases/words in workplace	86.36% (n=19)	9.09% (n=2)	4.55% (n=1)
Advocacy for LGB coworkers (n=21)	42.86% (n=9)	19.05% (n=4)	38.10% (n=8)

Table 3 reports the qualitative results of the suggestions for how to improve the workplace for LGB employees. Respondents often made multiple suggestions for improvement strategies. Table 3 lists the total number of responses for each suggestion.

Table 3

Strategies that Promote Diversity and Support in the Workplace

Variables (n=62)	%	Direct quotes
Training and socialization[a]	41.9% (26)	"Diversity celebration." "Teambuilding activities." "Offer trainings to any employee not comfortable with LGBT."
Policies and practices[a]	38.7% (24)	"Talk more about diversity." "Open minded attitude and atmosphere from other employees." "Be very mindful of what you say about others."
Increase leadership cultural diversity[a]	8.0% (5)	"Culturally diverse Board." "See leadership of organization reflect the racial make-up of the rest of the organization."
Hire more culturally diverse employees[a]	4.8% (3)	"Hire more diverse individuals." "Assessment of practices/ job descriptions/ structures around employing people with disabilities."

[a]Participants could make multiple suggestions for a strategy topic.

Table 4 reports the qualitative results from respondents regarding their own work environment. The responses are overwhelmingly positive. One of the participants felt that their workplace "embraces all diversity" regarding LGB-friendliness. An LGB participant stated she was comfortable "sharing information about her relationships around coworkers". One of the participants felt "she could not put it

[her feelings] into words". Another individual felt "sexual orientation could be easily hidden from her". Responses related to the quality of the work environment focused on personal levels of comfort for LGB inclusion at the work environment. Responses related to "policies and procedures" focused on benefits and insurance available to LGB employees.

Table 4

Descriptions that Suggest Diversity and Support in the Workplace

Variables (n=21)	%	Direct Quotes
Diverse LGB work environment	71.4% (15)	"I'm gay and very open/out at work. My coworkers talk about my relationships in the same ways that they talk about relationships between men and women. I have never felt uncomfortable with who I am or sharing that around my coworkers".
Uncertain of LGB-friendly vs LGB-unfriendly	19.1% (4)	"I can't really put it in to words. It strikes me as I write this that my view of "LGB-friendly" is just the absence of things that would be "LGB-un-friendly" (e.g., verbal harassment). This is a sad realization because it may not truly be "friendly" or "welcoming" but I view it as such because it's not negative".
Policies and practices	9.5% (2)	"My agency is very diverse and is supportive. Recently allowing same sex to share benefits such as insurance." "We have many co-workers that are LGB. Our benefits reflect that these individuals are respected."

Discussion

Outcome

The Advancing Strong Leadership of North Carolina DD professionals provided descriptive insight in answering the research study question: "What are the strategies that create a supportive work environment and acceptance in the workplace for LGB individuals?" Participants were clear about the ways that employers can protect LGB employees and diminish the risk of vulnerability to heterosexist and formal discrimination. Participants clearly understand that acceptance can occur for the LGB population within the workplace. Several strategy themes emerged from the survey data, and if enacted, these strategies will help create a supportive work environment that fosters acceptance in the workplace for LGB employees. The specific strategies identified in this study include: employee training and socialization, policy and practice changes, increasing the cultural diversity of leadership, and hiring a more culturally diverse staff. Implementing these strategies would provide a foundation for supportive change in the workplace for LGB employees.

Some of the results were unexpected. For example, employees who identify as LGB were well represented in the study. Close to 20% of the participants identified as LGB. It may be indicative of social service agencies, but these participants shared no negative experiences at their current employer related to support and acceptance. Some of the LGB participants stated that their same-sex relationship was accepted by co-workers the same way as any other heterosexual relationship. Additionally, the Likert-type questions offered thought provoking results. A high percentage of participants felt safe, experienced equality in the workplace, experienced limited use of homophobic language in the workplace, and rarely experienced indirect discrimination.

Implications for Social Work

The study results suggest specific supportive strategies that can be readily implemented by employers. These strategies are consistent with the NASW Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 2008), therefore, implementation in social service agencies may be an initial advocacy strategy. Successful implementation in social service agencies would provide continued momentum to advocate for further LGB equality in other workplace settings. Social workers are encouraged to collaborate with human resources departments to examine current policies related to support and acceptance for LGB employees. In addition, "people with whom LGB individuals interact with are often unaware of the LGB individual's sexual orientation (i.e., minority status) and thus may express values or ideas that denigrate homosexuality, increasing the LGB individual's stress" (Huffman, Watrous-Rodriguez, & King, 2008, p. 238). Social workers can serve as cultural competency staff trainers and facilitate increased awareness of the needs of all employees and decrease the risk of unintentional victimization, and stress for LGB employees.

Limitations

This is a small sample and only a third of the possible participants responded to the survey. Some of the surveys did not reach the intended participants due to an invalid email address, and others were not available during the data collection period. Huffman and colleagues (2008), had similar difficulties in their study, but had enough participant suggestions to create positive strategies from their research to show how to best support LGB employees.

Conclusion

As recent history has shown, LGB individuals are now allowed to wed in all 50 states. Sadly, discrimination and lack of support still exists for LGB employees. There has been limited research so far that focuses on developing strategies to support and decrease discrimination for LGB employees. However, the participants from this study have shown that there are strategies that can be implemented to create a more supportive and accepting workplace for LGB employees. These strategies included increased trainings and socialization, practice and policy changes, increasing cultural diversity in leadership, and hiring more diverse staff. Previous research has shown that when these types of strategies are implemented, LGB employees adjust quicker to new jobs, increase work productivity, experience less stress and are more committed to their agency compared to LGB employees who do not feel supported (Liddle et al., 2004). For an employee who identifies as LGB to feel fully supported and accepted in their agency, that support needs to come from supervisors, coworkers, and the organization itself (Huffman, Watrous-Rodriguez, & King, 2008). This research study is a first step in finding more direct approaches to implement support in the workplace for LGB individuality. Two participants agreed that this study could be replicated with other groups and in other agencies. Future research in this area is anticipated and much needed.

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Appendix

Survey

1. Do you consider your agency to be a friendly work environment? Yes or No
2. Do you believe changes can be made to help make your agency become a more supportive work environment and provide acceptance in the workplace? Yes or No
3. List up to three strategies that you would recommend to help make culturally diverse employees feel included in your agency. Culturally diverse employees are people of color, women, men, elders, etc.
4. Do you feel supported and accepted for who you are as an employee of your agency? Yes or No
5. Do you consider your agency to be a LGB-friendly work environment? (LGB=Lesbian, gay, bisexual) Yes or No
6. In a few words, explain your answer to the previous question.
7. List up to three strategies that you would recommend to help your agency become a more supportive work environment and provide acceptance in the workplace for LGB employees.
8. Please check the appropriate number that you feel best answers the statements based on this rating scale: 1-Clearly does not describe my feelings to 5-Clearly describes my feelings. At my agency, I feel: prejudice against culturally diverse employees exists; peoples' safety and well-being are protected; people are treated the same, regardless of their cultural diversity or sexual identity; there are rules and norms that indirectly discriminate against LGB people; people use homophobic words or phrases; and workers advocate for LGB workers who have been treated unfairly.
9. Please pick the characteristics that best describe your agency. Determine if your agency is a Public or Private agency. Once you have determined this, follow the line across and click on the

appropriate boxes that best fit your agency. (Non-profit versus For-profit agency and Less than 50 employees in my agency versus More than 50 employees in my agency)

10. Age (in years)
11. Gender
12. Race/Ethnicity (Choose all that apply): African American, European American, Asian American, Latino/Hispanic American, Native American, Middle-Eastern
13. Do you identify as LGB? Yes or No
14. Education level completion (Check one): GED/HS equivalency, High School Diploma, Associate's, degree, Some college/university/secondary education, Bachelor's degree, Some Master's/graduate education, Master's degree, Some PhD classes, and PhD.

About the Author(s)

Alyssa Soderlund received her MSW and BSW from the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. Her research interests include LGB, developmental disabilities, aging individuals, PTSD, and Trauma Focused-CBT. Alyssa is the Social Services Coordinator at a residential agency that supports adults with developmental disabilities and mental illness.