

Power^{TO}Fly™

Inclusive Language: How to Talk About Gender & Sexuality at Work

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





Introduction

June is Pride Month in the U.S. and in many countries around the world. It's a time to come together and to celebrate the LGBTQIA+ community. After a year of staying inside, those celebrations are particularly welcome! But Pride is also a time to recognize the adversities still faced by LGBTQIA+ people and to commit to working towards a brighter future.

That's especially important now. While it wasn't the first LGBTQIA+ protest, The Stonewall riots in New York City in June 1969 started Pride as we know it, and those riots were led by Black trans women. 50-plus years later, state legislatures are introducing a [record number of anti-trans bills](#) (over 100 in 2021 so far), with violence against trans people on the rise (2020 was the [deadliest year on record](#) for transgender and gender non-confirming people).

Our Executive Forum last week focused on Pride at work, and the specific things that companies can do, particularly around how they approach inclusive language, to show up for these communities at work and help shift societal norms for better.

DEI work isn't just about getting new faces in the door or launching new initiatives—it also includes looking at the smaller, everyday ways we communicate and do business, and working to make sure they support employees of all backgrounds and experiences. Shifting the language that you use in hiring, training, and managing employees can go a long way in building a more inclusive work environment that supports and uplifts your LGBTQIA+ colleagues.

To help us do that, we invited Milagros Chirinos, Associate Director of the Global Workplace Equality Program at the Human Rights Campaign, and Andrea Breanna, CEO of RebelMouse, to share their perspectives on what allyship means in action and how leaders can set an example of inclusion.



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The State of Support for LGBTQIA+ Employees: An Overview



In 2021, supporting LGBTQIA+ employees is the status quo among our participants' companies:

50% of participants' companies say their organization is well-positioned to support LGBTQIA+ employees, and an additional **39%** say that their organization is working towards that.

However, there's still work to be done to foster environments where LGBTQIA+ employees feel they can be themselves, per a [Catalyst report](#) and [McKinsey findings](#):

1 in 10

LGBTQIA+ employees reported leaving a job because of an unsupportive work environment

1 in 2

LGBTQIA+ employees in the U.S. are closeted in the workplace because they don't think they would find a supportive environment

A McKinsey study found the number of closeted employees to be even higher among less-experienced employees: **68%** of junior employees are not out at work (compared to only **20%** of senior leaders)

50%

of LGBTQIA+ employees have chosen not to pursue or accept a position because they thought the organization was not inclusive enough



Participants' organizational support tends to manifest in a few different areas:

- **LGBTQIA+-focused ERGs**, which **72%** of participating organizations have
- **Education on LGBTQIA+ topics made available to all employees**, which **74%** of organizations have

But not everyone has specific guidelines in place for what inclusive language should look like at work:

- Only **50%** of organizations encourage employees to use pronouns in emails, Slack, and other forms of communication
- While **18%** of companies have held trainings on how to use pronouns and **29%** have done trainings on pronouns along with other terminology and definitions, **53%** of respondents are either unsure what their companies offer or know that neither type of training is offered

Expert Perspective on Inclusion through Language at Work

Milagros Chirinos began her presentation with a vital point: allyship isn't one-size-fits-all.

"As a concept, allyship is ever-changing, and it evolves as we continue to strive for deeper commitment to the [LGBTQIA+] community and as we learn how to best serve these communities," she says.

The organizer shared several approaches for companies and their leaders who want to foster that inclusive commitment for LGBTQIA+ talent:

- **Lead with empathy**

"We cannot fully understand the experiences of others, but we can think about and put ourselves in someone else's shoes via empathy," she says. *"How would you process discrimination, stigma, violence, social attacks, all for being who you are, loving who you love, coming from where you come from, or being what society sees as different?"* Even if you yourself are not a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, you should start your allyship by listening to the experiences of others and centering their needs.

- **Silence is complicity**

"You need to know and communicate to others that engaging in discriminatory behaviors is wrong," explains Milagros. One of the most powerful things you can do as a leader is speak out for marginalized groups when you see or hear others discriminating against them or excluding them.





- **Be inclusive without forcing boundaries**

It's great when leaders share their pronouns proactively, for example, says Milagros, but putting employees in a position where they are forced to share their pronouns can be problematic. *"Don't make it mandatory—you don't want to out people or interrupt their coming-out process,"* she says. After you've allowed employees to opt-in to sharing their pronouns, make sure that your internal systems support their chosen pronouns, whether that's in email signatures, business cards, name badges, digital directories, or internal org charts.

- **Consider intersectionality**

"We can't be selective as far as what and how we support people," says Milagros. That means if you have a colleague who is a Black lesbian with two children, you need to see her and support her Blackness, her motherhood, and her sexual orientation, not just one of those aspects of her lived experience.

- **Start by examining your culture and processes**

Before you can start crunching numbers on how much of your workforce identifies as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, make sure that you have an inclusive base culture. *"It needs to be part of your identity as an employer,"* says Milagros. *"It's not just the diversity aspect, but the inclusive aspect. Will those employees feel welcome? What internal change needs to happen first?"* That could mean everything from rewriting policies to be gender-neutral to adding a third box beyond male/female for self-selection in the interview process to funding an ERG for already-hired employees with that identity.

Andrea Breanna's talk focused on her lived experience of coming out as a trans woman after having had a successful career in tech as the CTO at HuffPost and then the founder and CEO of RebelMouse.

"I felt like I had to be honest with the world and with everyone around me," says Andrea. "Obviously it's an unfair advantage in inclusivity when your CEO is openly trans! It changes everything," she adds.

Andrea highlighted a few lessons that she learned through her experience that other leaders should keep in mind:

- **Employees are paying attention**

Andrea's chief strategy officer messaged her before they joined. At that point, Andrea wasn't out, but had been publicly supportive of the LGBTQIA+ community on social media. "They'd studied my Facebook, my Twitter," shares Andrea. "You can think nobody is watching, that no one sees, no one notices, but those actions make a big difference." She's even heard of employees who noticed that their boss changed their avatar to a Pride icon for June. "Words are magic, and small things that publicly acknowledge that you are not only not homophobic but a true ally, and that can change a life, literally," she says.

- **It's okay to get it wrong—just be "brave enough to learn**

"Everyone fails!" says Andrea of doing things like getting someone's pronouns wrong. The important thing is to acknowledge mistakes when they happen and lead by example in correcting them.

- **Embracing queerness makes it safe for everyone to express themselves**

"The buttoning up of ourselves can also be the straightening of us," says Andrea. "You're allowed to laugh, and sit funny, and have your jokes." Embracing people's sexuality and personal expression can help pave the way for people feeling comfortable speaking with accents, engaging in personal mannerisms, and being themselves in other ways. "Leaders can make everyone feel like they have to be straight, white, and male to succeed, and that's the thing on a cultural level to battle against," says Andrea. "Let us have diverse ways of working."

She also shared her personal contact info; anyone looking to talk more about supporting LGBTQIA+ employees can do so with Andrea [via email](#), [LinkedIn](#), or [Twitter](#).

After our expert presentations and keynotes, we welcomed a roundtable discussion where Executive Forum participants could share their advice and perspective.



Collective Wisdom: 11 Ways to Create an Inclusive Work Culture

From training to hiring to marketing, here are what Executive Forum facilitators and participants have found to work when it comes to embracing inclusive language and practices to better support LGBTQIA+ talent.

What works when it comes to using inclusive language at your companies:

- 1. Hosting mandatory all-staff DEI trainings, with a pronoun lesson/presentation included**
As one participant shared, this works best when those trainings are followed up with specific reminders and encouragements, like when a Pride ERG sends out allyship action tips around key times such as the International Day Against Homophobia.
- 2. Sharing resources**
One participant said they created their own dictionary of inclusive language, replete with suggested conversation starters, which really worked because it educated their staff without embarrassing everyone, particularly those who didn't want to admit they didn't know what certain things meant. Others shared that they're creating not just an inclusive dictionary but an *exclusive* list of words and phrases (like "black sheep" or "you guys") that aren't inclusive and should be avoided.
- 3. Considering language on a broader scale**
Inclusive communication goes farther than adding pronouns to your email signature or striking all uses of "manpower" from your employer manual. Participants shared that even words like "ally" can have negative connotations in some parts of the world, and that phrases like "supporters" or "action partners" worked better for them. Remember to consider the community you're serving in your language. Employees who speak Spanish, for instance, might have a different context for what "inclusive" language is, and multinational companies might need to adjust their approach depending on the region.





4. Encouraging, but not requiring, sharing pronouns

Provide a safe space for employees to share their pronouns if they choose to do so.

5. Enabling leadership from LGBTQIA+ employees

Some of the most meaningful progress participants have seen has been championed by individuals within their companies, for example via lunch-and-learns focused on inclusive language and how it's okay to get it wrong, as long as you're trying and you're willing to learn.

6. Being proactive, not reactive

Just like it's better to have a gender-neutral bathroom option in place before a non-binary or trans employee joins, it's easier for everyone involved if you already do things like encourage pronoun use in email signatures before you hire trans talent, so that they don't feel like business norms have to shift for them.

And some reminders for how that progress usually unfolds:

7. It's a slow battle

One participant shared how her company has turned from saying "why are we doing that?" regarding DEI initiatives to "what are we doing?", which is a step change, even if there's a long way to go. She reminded participants that change happens gradually, and that going too fast can alienate the people we need to be allies.

8. When executives are bought in, things go more smoothly

A memo going out from a C-suite executive setting the expectation that an organization is inclusive and equitable can go a long way in making that true. That goes double if the executive identifies as being part of the LGBTQIA+ community themselves. When executives and managers and other leaders are out and proud at work, less experienced employees often feel like they have a safe person to talk to and that they can show up as their authentic selves.

Here are ways you can make sure your company isn't just “checking the box” when it comes to celebrating Pride:

9. Be public about your support

Fly Pride flags at headquarters, change online avatars, and run specific campaigns in support of the LGBTQIA+ community, of course. But go beyond that and really consider your employee branding all year round. How are you highlighting the contributions of LGBTQIA+ employees? How are your ad campaigns embracing the diversity of the market?

10. Address microaggressions when they happen

Sienna's approach is to “*lead in love,*” which has two parts: acknowledging the person who's made a mistake or said something hurtful, then educating them on the impact of their perspective or action. That works best, discussed participants, when everyone is as straightforward and transparent as possible. “*Curiosity, not conclusions.*”

11. Make sure your hiring process is actually equitable

That might mean *not* collecting data on applicants' sexuality and identity if you cannot guarantee that that data won't be used in a problematic way. Keep in mind that the focus early on should be in showing applicants that your company is a safe place for them—not asking them to put themselves in the vulnerable position of sharing personal information and hoping it's well-received. A good way to do this is by making sure that all interview panels have at least one person from an underrepresented background at all times so that applicants can see that there's no one “typical” type of employee there. You can also give applicants an opportunity to share their pronouns early in the process.



Recommended Resources

During the Forum, PowerToFly's Senior Manager of Global DEI Strategy Sienna Brown shared a brief guide to the identities that make up the LGBTQIA+ acronym. While the definitions themselves are important, the most important thing to remember is not to skip out on some of the letters out of convenience. While some members choose to use only some of the letters (and you should respect that personal preference), if in doubt, use the entire LGBTQIA+ acronym. It may be harder on the tongue, but it's worth putting in the extra effort to be more inclusive in your language!

LGBTQIA+

Lesbian:

same-sex female attraction

L

Gay:

same-sex male attraction, also a universal term for same-sex attraction

G

Bisexual (also termed as bi):
attracted to both binary genders

B

Trans (short for transgender):

Latin prefix for "on the other side of," when someone doesn't identify with the gender identity or gender expression that they were born with

T

Queer:

universal term that includes anyone who falls out of the traditional norms (even if they are heterosexual), i.e. in a polyamorous relationship, gender-fluid, etc.

Q

Intersex:

born with sex characteristics that do not fit the gender binary

I

Asexual:

lack of sexual attraction to others or low interest in sexual activity

A

+:

a major signifier of inclusivity and acceptance and includes anything not mentioned in the acronym

+

Recommended Resources

And a reminder of other key terms in this space:

Sex:

biological characteristics that someone is born with

Gender:

assigned at birth, a social construct

Trans (short for transgender):

Latin prefix for "across, over, or beyond." Often used as an abbreviation for transgender, denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex.

Cis (short for cisgender):

Latin prefix for "on the same side of," when someone does identify with the gender identity or gender expression that they were born with assigned at birth, a social construct

Recommended Resources

For further learning, training, and inspiration, check out these resources endorsed by forum participants:

- [This Slate article](#) on why y'all is the best inclusive second person plural pronoun
- [This Michigan State educational guide](#) on how to discuss pronouns, complete with FAQ
- [This PowerToFly article](#) on gender neutral language at work, with 3 tips for getting started

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