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# **Antecedents and Consequences of Participation in a National Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Workplace Conference**

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study examined participant motivation and outcomes of a national LGBT workplace conference. The conference provides educational workshops on a variety of LGBT related workplace issues, designed to provide information, education, business case strategies and personal empowerment.

## **Introduction and Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the learning that participants of a national lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) conference experienced. With an attendance in excess of 1,600 people across a wide variety of industries and locations, this conference has gained pronounced momentum and expansion since its beginning in 1999. The conference duration was three days, and there were approximately 70 different sessions. The session themes were organized around the following: making the business case for LGBT inclusion, transgender issues, race, gender, and sexual orientation, leadership, employee resource groups, domestic partner and other types of benefits for LGBT employees, LGBT inclusion and corporate strategy, and how to be an effective straight ally. The researcher, who is an Adult Educator, an out Lesbian, a scholar of LGBT workplace issues, and a regular attendee of this conference, developed a curiosity about the motivation of learners as well as the results of attendance. This curiosity provided the inspiration and impetus for the study.

## **Theoretical Frames**

Attendance at this conference has increased dramatically since its inaugural event in 1999. There has been a concomitant increase in the depth and breadth of educational seminars and workshops offered by the conference. Clearly, *learning* is a key objective for participants. Merizow's transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997) and Friere's emancipatory theory of transformation (Friere, 1970, 1993) provide the theoretical frames for the study. According to Mezirow (2003, p. 58), "transformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change." Mezirow (2000) argues that "transformation refers to a movement through time of reformulating reified structures of meaning by reconstructing dominant narratives" (p. 19). The work of Paulo Friere frames the study as well. "Freire viewed education as politically charged. It either teaches the values of the dominant group, or it helps learners to reflect critically and then to take action to make society more just and equitable." (Brooks, 2004, p. 216).

The conference provides educational opportunities for participants to learn how to successfully challenge the hetero-normativity of the workplace. The conference is designed and held every year to help empower LGBT employees with information,

education, and individual and organizational strategies to help them create more inclusive, democratic, welcoming, and LGBT-friendly workplace cultures. Theories of power, politics and access also frame the study. Because LGBT people are often silent and/or invisible in organizations, they unwittingly perpetuate the problems presented by heterosexism. “Inaction on the part of workers is another form in which organizational power manifests...People often become complicit in their own oppression, in effect helping to sustain it” (Cervero & Wilson, 2001, p. 53).

### Research Methodology

A qualitative research design was used, with a purposive sample of twelve research participants. Using the attendee list, which was distributed after the conference to all who attended, individual email invitations to participate in the research were sent to approximately thirty people. The interviews were conducted via phone, and lasted on the average approximately one hour. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The interview format was semi-structured, and was framed around the following questions:

1. Why do participants attend the Summit—what are their learning objectives?
2. What do attendees learn? What is the organizational impact?
3. To what extent is participation in the Summit supported and recognized by Human Resource Development (HRD) and Management?

Research participants included three Caucasian gay men, one Asian gay man, five Caucasian lesbian women, one African-American lesbian woman, one Transgender woman, and one Caucasian heterosexual woman. The age range of the participants was early 30s to early 50s, and participants worked in a variety of industries. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method, comparing one set of data with another to find similarities and differences (Merriam, 1998).

Figure 1: Background of Research Participants

Name*	LGBT	Sector	Location	Time Off for Attendance?	Funding for Attendance?
Susan	Lesbian	Insurance	Midwest	YES	YES
Heather	Lesbian	Insurance	Midwest	YES	YES
Tony	Gay man	Banking	East coast	YES	YES
Mary	Transgender woman	Grocery/pharmacy	Northwest	NO	NO
Edward	Gay man	High-Tech	Northwest	YES	YES
Samuel	Gay man	Consumer products	Midwest	NO	YES
Judy	Lesbian	Consumer products	Midwest	NO	NO
Steven	Gay man	Manufacturing	Northeast	YES	YES
Lauren	Straight ally (woman)	Banking and Finance	Northeast	YES	YES
Clare	Lesbian	Automotive	South	YES	YES
Kathryn	Lesbian	Not-for-profit	East	YES	YES
Ann	Lesbian	Not-for-profit	West coast	YES	YES
*pseudonym					

## Themes

Each of the twelve participants self-selected to attend the conference. There were varying types of motivations for attending, which included interest in acquiring or increasing their personal resilience, interest in networking with other LGBT activists, and interest in learning about strategies to strengthen the business case for LGBT inclusion from other companies and organizations. Nine of the twelve participants got paid time off to attend the conference, and ten of the twelve received funding. Samuel, who used his own vacation time, indicated his satisfaction with the deal he struck with his company. He noted that because of limited resources and financial instability at his company, he felt responsible to use his own time to attend.

The findings centered on five major themes: a) Enhancement of personal resilience and agency, b) Identification of the disconnect between organizational policy and culture, c) Identification of the ineffective and reactive role of Human Resources, d) Communication and implementation of strategies to strengthen the business case for LGBT inclusion, and e) Perspective transformations of heterosexual allies. All of the lesbian, gay and transgender participants felt refreshed and emboldened by the sense of community that they experienced at the conference. All of the participants, including the heterosexual allies, experienced emancipatory learning, which involved a “process of participant critical reflection on themselves and organizational or social communities” (Brooks, 2004, p. 216). They learned about creating and implementing interventions that resist the hetero-patriarchal hegemony of organizational systems.

### *Enhancement of Personal Resilience and Agency*

Freire proposed program-planning that liberates people by helping them find their voice which has been suppressed by existing structures that promote social inequality (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, p. 22). Every one of the lesbian, gay and transgender participants indicated that they felt a sense of empowerment as a result of attending the conference. Edward commented that “one of the biggest things I walk away with is a sense of empowerment, just knowing that there are so many other people working on the same issue and working very diligently and creatively to impact their work environment.” Steven noted that

*The takeaways...clearly first just being comfortable in your own skin and living your own life and talking, talking to people, in almost any setting, about being gay and what that means that I mean to you personally, what it means in terms of rights that you have and rights you are denied.*

Susan commented that the conference “legitimizes us [LGBT people]. There’s nothing like it. Suddenly, we are not the outsiders anymore.” Heather reflected that she gained self-confidence about her lesbian identity, and that she came out in business meeting during introductions:

*The biggest impact is has I think I can explain it this way I just moved to a new office with a new group of management people and when I had my first meeting with them there were about ten of them, twelve, and I sat around the conference room and I asked everybody to go around the room and tell me about themselves...they were all going through their family and stuff and when it came around to me I told ‘em a little about about me including my partner, my partner’s name...I had never done that before.*

Heather's experience reflects Freire's notion that "conversion to the people means profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were" (1970, 1993, p. 61).

Mary, who is a transgender woman, commented that:

*I thought it would be a good networking opportunity and when I got there I learned what it really was, and was able to wrap my mind around it I became involved in it. I'm really on fire about it. It was an opportunity for me to expand my horizons.*

#### *Identification of the Disconnect Between Organizational Policy and Culture*

Freire (1970, 1993) claimed that "The more active an attitude men and women take in regard to the exploration of their thematic, the more the deeper their critical awareness of reality and, in spelling out those thematic, take possession of that reality" (p. 106). Participants in the study identified the disconnect between the "structural amendments" (Hill, 2006, p. 11) intended to signal LGBT inclusion such as domestic partner benefits, and the true, day-to-day culture of LGBT inclusion at their respective organizations. While there was a clear majority of participants who were supported with paid time off and with funding to attend, several of them noted that they represent a significant minority of those willing, within their respective organizations, to self-identify as LGBT. Steven noted that:

*It's something that we feel needs to be changed but we're trying to understand environmentally, socially, culturally, that prevents people who ascend to those positions without being out from choosing to proclaim that they're out once they've arrived in those positions, and so I think that's why some of us see the need to do whatever we can to make the environment right for others. We feel that there is some lack of openness and comfort for a lot of people and so that transcends up and down the ranks in the corporation.*

Susan commented that there is a "big difference between surface changes such as domestic partner benefits and marketing changes, but then there are deep cultural changes that need to take place." Clare identified a high-ranking woman in her organization who is a lesbian, and whose lesbianism is tacitly known, but who is not out. Clare expressed her disappointment that the woman is closeted, because she feels that she could serve as a powerful role model for other lesbians but also as a champion for LGBT inclusion. Steven commented that "we do have people in our company who would not feel comfortable asking their own department for support." Edward stated:

*I think there is still a significant number of people who do not feel comfortable about their sexual orientation, and if you don't know that someone is, they are essentially invisible...Even though we have policies in place to prevent any kind of discrimination or harassment or whatever, I think there are those kinds of individuals who do not want to be the guinea pig to test them out.*

#### *Identification of the Ineffective and Reactive Role of Human Resources*

Human Resources did not fare well in the interviews for this study. Regarding her transition, Mary lamented that "right now, their mindset is, we don't want anything to do with this, we want this to go away" Susan and Clare both specifically identified the lack of knowledge and support from their HR departments. Clare indicated that her HR

department was not even aware that domestic partner benefits were taxable. Edward reflected:

*HR plays a vital role in creating the kind of place we want to work in...you can't assume that your HR director is in tune with what your needs are so you have to be willing to be vocal about those needs.*

#### *Implementation of Strategies to Strengthen the Business Case for LGBT Inclusion*

Several of the participants indicated that they attended the conference in order to learn the best practices of other companies regarding LGBT inclusion. One of the participants used the term “corporate surveillance” when describing this activity. The attendees recognized their responsibility for initiating change in their organizations. As such, part of their strategy for creating change is communicating the benefits that accrue to the organization as a result of inclusive practices. This orientation reflects the Friirian notion that “thematic investigation thus becomes a common striving towards awareness of reality and towards self-awareness, which makes this investigation a starting point for the educational process or for cultural action of a liberating character” (1970, 1993, p. 107). This learning also illustrates Habermas’ (1984, in Mezirow, 1997) notion of instrumental learning, which helps to frame Mezirow’s transformative learning theory. Instrumental learning means learning to control or manipulate the environment or other people (Habermas, in Mezirow). Edward commented that “Everything’s about the money. While some people recognize that it’s the right thing to do, you know, there’s lots of right things to do that we cannot afford to do.” Samuel understands the strategic importance of using the insights gained from the conference to inform senior leadership about the competitors: “We come back from the conference and try to make as much hay as possible...’here’s what our competitors are doing’ is always a biggie...the companies that we compete for talent with...”

#### *Perspective Transformations of Heterosexual Allies*

The heterosexual participant in the study experienced a pronounced transformative moment, because: “It was a cathartic event for me...I realized during the process that I was actually homophobic with lesbians.” Three of the research participants noted that their heterosexual peers and allies who attended the conference acquired new frames of reference around their own heterosexist assumptions. Mezirow (2000, p. 5) states that “learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience to guide future action.” Lauren, the straight ally participant, reflected that she underwent a perceptual shift in her thinking about LGBT issues which resulted in her own activism as a straight ally. She said that she plans to attend the conference every year, whether it be part of her job expectation or not, and that her entire frame of reference around LGBT issues has shifted. She now uses inclusive language on her personal correspondence, such as holiday newsletters to family and friends, and she can no longer sit in silent toleration of homo-negative jokes or remarks. Heather noted about a colleague: “My counterpart, who is actually a straight, white male...we brought some information back to our...group about this conference and I tease him that he’s more passionate about this group that I am! He’s a straight ally, and that’s great!”

### **Conclusion and Implications for Adult Education**

The study identified some key learning intentions and outcomes for participants of a national LGBT workplace conference. The implications of this research provide sensitivity for Adult Educators, Trainers, and Human Resource Management practitioners about the continued and pervasive lack of education and awareness in organizational America about LGBT issues. Conversely, the study provides specific suggestions for program planning and design of LGBT workplace equality programs. Participants in this national LGBT workplace conference gained resilience and they acquired increased personal agency. They became more skilled at negotiating power and making the business case for resources to support LGBT inclusion. Additionally the conference serves as a transformative platform for the acquisition and sharing of business knowledge, strategies, and competitive information. Because of the transformative learning experienced by heterosexual allies as a result of the conference, there are implications for the positive impact of the conference for heterosexual organization members, particularly those in positions of influence.

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