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LGBTQ Employee Groups: Who Are They Good For? How Are They Organized?

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Abstract: LGBTQ employees seek workplace change through formal and informal groups. Some groups emphasize broader social change and others focus on organizational performance. We provide the social and historical background of these groups and provide a framework for understanding their goals and aims.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) employee groups provide an organized platform from which employees can advocate for changes within their employing organizations and provide a space for social support. We provide a social and historical background on LGBTQ employee groups and provide a framework for understanding different approaches to organizing these groups. These groups vary in their approaches to organizing and in their focus on bringing broader social change or emphasis on improving professional conditions for their members and/or improving the effectiveness of the employing organization.

Social and Historical Background of LGBTQ Employee Groups

Raeburn (2004) provides an analysis of the significant growth of formal, organized LGB employee networks in the U.S. from 1978 to 1998. The number of networks in Fortune 1000 companies (i.e., the top 1000 publicly-traded U.S. companies, based on revenue) grew from two in 1980 to 69 in 1998.¹ This growth came in spurts, instead of being gradual. Raeburn explains that the fluctuating growth of these groups corresponds to the larger political environments of each period and to the grassroots and national mobilization efforts in the larger LGBTQ community. For example, with the rise of the New Right in the early 1980s, no new employee networks were started from 1981 to 1985. In the years that saw Bill Clinton come into the presidency, the number of networks went from 10 in 1989 to 50 in 1994.

As employee groups were formed, many needed to justify their existence if they sought official organizational recognition. Employer-recognized groups are usually expected to help create competitive advantage or improve organizational effectiveness. Therefore, these groups must balance their activist agendas with the need to contribute to the organization. This balancing act can be understood through Fenwick's (2004) call for seeking "small wins" within organizations and through Meyerson and Scully's (1995) idea of "tempered radicalism." These ideas help us to understand how activists sustain their motivation when making slow progress and how these individuals serve both the needs of their employers and fulfill their drive for social justice. However, other groups exist without employer recognition, either because they are informal and unstructured or because their goals are incompatible with the employer's goals.

In examining the role of employee activists in securing partner benefits, Raeburn (2004) found that the corporate executives she spoke with downplayed or ignored the role

¹ As of February 2007, the Human Rights Campaign database (www.hrc.org) lists 144 employee groups in Fortune 1000 companies.

of employee activists in securing partner benefits, even though the evidence showed otherwise. She found that for-profit companies emphasize making these decisions because they make “good business sense” rather than because it is “the right thing to do.” This follows the rhetoric of other socially responsible actions by many businesses. But, Raeburn found that as leaders stressed that their decisions were dictated by the market’s “invisible hand,” current or potential employee activists became less motivated to encourage policy changes because changes seemed inevitable.

In addition to working explicitly for changes within the organizations, employee groups serve less activist-oriented goals by providing social support and networking opportunities for LGBTQ employees and allies. These less political needs are a key factor in why employees become involved in the groups. When Scully and Segal (2002) pushed the activists in their study for information about what employee groups actually do or what they accomplish, members told stories of the groups’ founding or talked about the groups’ existence as the major accomplishment. Their existence was their “doing.” The groups provide a place for activists and non-activists to meet others who have similar identities, which helps them persist in struggling for LGBTQ causes and helps them in their quest to openly exist as LGBTQ people.

Approaches to LGBTQ Employee Groups

LGBTQ employee groups, like all organizations or small groups, differ in their ultimate goals for existence. Organizational change can be aimed toward improving organizational effectiveness (in for-profit organizations, this is usually done to maximize profits) or toward broader social goals, which can include the betterment of society (Whittington, 2001).

Like other groups, LGBTQ employee groups also vary in their orientation toward the nature of organizations and the structure (or lack of structure) required to successfully meet their goals, regardless of their reasons for seeking those goals. When considering the nature of organizational change, individuals and organizations differ on the degree to which they are influenced by the view that organizations tend toward order or toward chaos (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). If organizations tend toward order, systematization is sought. If they tend toward chaos, emergent thinking is embraced. In other words, attitudes toward organizational change vary depending on their perspectives regarding the “holistic or fragmentary nature” (Fisher, 2005, p. 240) of organizations and whether organizational change occurs through methodical action or emerges through the informal or bottom-up efforts by individuals (Whittington, 2001).

In order to understand the diversity among LGBTQ employee groups, we have developed a framework for viewing these groups (depicted in Table 1), using the concepts outlined above from the organization theory literature. This table shows two continuums that help to add perspective to the varying orientations under which the groups operate. The horizontal axis depicts (1) the level of orientation toward social change or (2) the level of focus on improving organizational effectiveness. The vertical axis depicts the degree to which there is (1) an embrace of chaos and emergent thinking or (2) a striving toward order. The framework was influenced by models of individual, group, and organization orientations (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Fisher, 2005; Whittington, 2001), in addition to empirical studies of employee groups (e.g., Bierema, 2005; Raeburn, 2004).

Regardless of the nature of the employee group, the individual decision to join or organize an employee group, like the decision to reveal one's sexuality, is often related to personal reasons, professional reasons, and social justice motivations (Humphrey, 1999). Individual reasons for being active in an employee group could vary from the group's perspective. For example, an individual could take up one approach while the larger employee group takes another. Additionally, an employee group could present itself in one way to the management, but take another approach in its actual practice. These approaches are not as neat and defined as they appear in this table (hence the dashed line, to indicate the permeability of these continuums). However, this framework provides one way of presenting the competing emphases dealt with by LGBTQ groups.

Table 1:

Approaches to Organizing LGBTQ Employee Groups		
Emergent		
Emphasize social change	<p style="text-align: center;">Queer/Radical Approaches</p> <p>e.g., small groups bringing subversive change, informal labor groups</p> <p>Small informal groups that work to bring change through overt or subtle subversive action. Reject gay/straight binaries, work with broad coalitions, and integrate broader social issues into LGBTQ activism.</p>	Emphasize organizational effectiveness
	<p style="text-align: center;">Organized Unofficial Approaches</p> <p>e.g., LGBTQ union groups, LGBTQ police groups</p> <p>Structured groups that are not sanctioned by the employing organization. Aim for social change in society and the organization.</p>	
Strive for order		
	<p style="text-align: center;">Internally Responsive Informal Approaches</p> <p>e.g., informal mentoring/networking groups</p> <p>Unofficial groups for career development, social support among LGBTQ workers, encouragement of diversity for competitive advantage</p>	
	<p style="text-align: center;">Conventional Approaches</p> <p>e.g., LGBT employee resource groups, diversity committees</p> <p>Structured, formally-sanctioned groups that organize formal programs, encourage discourse on diversity.</p>	

Conventional Approaches

Employee groups are commonly commissioned or approved by the employing organization, which we label as *conventional*. In such cases, the groups typically emphasize their connection to the goals of their employers through discourse surrounding diversity, multiculturalism, and employee satisfaction. In for-profit corporations, this emphasis often means linking these groups to an ultimate increase in profits. In non-profit or governmental sectors, these groups justify their existence by linking their goals to their employers' aims of becoming more effective service providers.

Employee activists often frame equity and fairness issues in business terms, although their primary motivations are usually much larger than the goal of increasing corporate profit or improving organizational effectiveness (Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Raeburn, 2004; Scully & Segal, 2002). In a sense, they are co-opting the language of corporate profit for their larger social purposes. Insider activists are forced into awkward positions at times. Although they usually identify with their employers and want the organizations to be successful, they also identify on a deep level with their activist cause (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). This dual identity results in a long-term ambivalence that must be dealt with on a continual basis.

Since these groups operate under the auspices of the employing organization, they are organized in some fashion and usually have an official liaison with the organization's HR or diversity department. Historically, HR's role in conventional employee groups has been important. In some organizations, employees in HR have served as allies who support these groups and help to foster environments where they can flourish. However, there is a need for organizations to *encourage* these groups instead of to *control* them from the top-down (Scully & Segal, 2002). In Scully and Segal's study, members wanted

the help and support of managers, but wanted to experiment with small-scale local changes rather than being subjected to management or HR initiatives. Some companies explicitly forbid employee groups from engaging in any lobbying of executives. These groups are forced to advocate for changes in very subtle ways, such as very soft education efforts (Out & Equal Workplace Advocates, 2006). This heavy-handed control can lead to resentment by group members and dysfunction in the group, creating an employee relations problem. In Bierema's (2005) study of a "failed" women's employee group, she concluded that groups may be setting themselves up for failure if the organizational culture hinders the group from bringing about change and instead insists on assimilation. Additionally, she found that members had a fear of being considered activists or feminists in this unsupportive organization. Bierema suggested that alternatives to *formal* networks might be more viable in such organizations.

Internally Responsive Informal Approaches

Perhaps the most common type of LGBTQ group takes an *internally responsive informal approach*. Groups that operate under this approach often need no official recognition and are sometimes merely informal gatherings of friends and colleagues. Many conventional groups had their origins in these informal groups (Raeburn, 2004). Some groups decide to seek official organizational recognition or are approached by the employing organization to become officially recognized. Similar to conventional approaches, employee groups in the *internally responsive informal* category emphasize an improvement of organizational effectiveness. Alternatively, they emphasize professional enhancement, career development, or social support, which can be linked clearly to an improvement of organizational effectiveness. This could mean meeting in informal support groups, providing mentoring, or providing social and networking opportunities for workers. When these groups become more overtly political, they often advocate for policy changes within organizations, which may require formal employer recognition. However, not all of these groups transition into conventional organization-sponsored groups. In LGBTQ communities, some individuals prefer the lower profile or anonymity of an unofficial group. Others may seek social support, but do not wish to bring about overt changes in the organization.

In organizations that have more progressive policies toward LGBTQ people (e.g., inclusive equal employment opportunity policies, domestic partner benefits), conventional employee groups are moving beyond an emphasis on changing macro policies and engaging in change and education efforts that are better addressed in smaller, local settings within their organizations. In such settings, they sometimes focus on fostering a friendly culture toward LGBTQ people, which is better addressed through small scale efforts (Out & Equal Workplace Advocates, 2006). Informal groups may be a better setting for encouraging these small-scale efforts in organizations that have already made LGBTQ-friendly policy changes.

Organized Unofficial Approaches

Some groups organize outside the employing organization in order to bring about social change at their places of employment. These groups form structured organizations, but seek social change within their employing organization (rather than focusing on organizational effectiveness). LGBTQ union groups take this approach. For example,

AFL-CIO “Pride at Work” chapters exist around the country, in addition to groups within specific unions (e.g., National Education Association GLBT Caucus). These groups emphasize broader social change that includes the specific conditions faced by LGBTQ workers, the interests of other non-LGBTQ groups, and the broader economic interests of all workers. Duggan (2003) argues that this multifaceted approach is necessary in order to avoid a weakened focus on equality that results in the co-option of LGBTQ interests by larger economic forces. In other words, she bemoans the assimilationist aims of groups that narrowly focus on LGBTQ issues, but ignore other types of inequality (e.g., economic inequality).

In some sectors, where union recognition is/was not viable for LGBTQ groups, workers started their own unaffiliated groups. For example, the Gay Officers Action League (GOAL) started in New York in 1982 (Jirak, 2001). In the same year, the head of the police union claimed that there were no gay or lesbian police officers in New York. The group formed in order to make members visible to their fellow police officers, the administration, and the union. Since 1982, LGBTQ law enforcement groups have slowly spread throughout the world and the groups oftentimes serve as de facto liaisons between police departments and larger LGBTQ communities, serving the interests of the LGBTQ officers and the larger LGBTQ community.

Queer/Radical Approaches

Some groups may emphasize broader social goals (like the organized unofficial groups), but have little desire to be formally organized or to be affiliated with larger institutions. The goal of those taking such an approach is not improvement at the organizational level, but improvement of social conditions. In LGBTQ circles, some activists have advocated for universalizing and queer approaches (rather than identity-based approaches) in which sexuality is seen as fluid and existing on a continuum (Sedgwick, 1990). They argue that such approaches are more appropriate because of the opportunity for opening discursive possibilities through examining the normalization of heterosexuality (rather than focusing on homophobia as a psychological condition to be cured) (Britzman, 1995). This broader approach has the potential to open up conversations and include a wider range of individuals. Instead of seeking to create an understanding of and recognition of LGBT persons, queer approaches to change and education efforts seek to complicate these issues by dealing with the multifaceted approaches to performing gender and sexuality. In addition to being used by informal groups adopting queer approaches, queer ideas can influence groups falling into the other three approaches described above.

Queer conceptions of activism can allow for addressing the differences of all workers, not just those who are a sexual minority (Hill, 2004). By their nature, queer groups emphasize common cause and coalition building with other groups. Since queer approaches de-emphasize LGBT identities, they focus on integrating queer issues with broader social problems. For example, a group of queer employee activists could build coalitions with those trying to improve economic conditions (e.g., a union) or with those calling for an employer to be more socially responsible (e.g., environmental groups). Diversity efforts, civil rights laws, and multiculturalism have run into repeated backlash due to their limited scope. Queer approaches encourage calls for exploring individual authenticity by rejecting taken-for-granted binaries and practices. Authenticity can be

encouraged so that all people can feel free to express their individual differences. This type of authenticity cannot be forced through government or organizational mandates; instead it comes from small-scale efforts and interpersonal relationships. Duggan's (2003) ideas (described in the *organized unofficial approaches* section) are relevant here, particularly her call for moving beyond a singular focus on issues of difference and instead integrating these differences (e.g., sexuality, race, gender) with economic issues. Due to the global nature of our society and worldwide scope of social, economic, and cultural problems, narrowly focused solutions may be short-sighted and may provide only temporary and partial improvement of conditions (e.g., O'Donnell, 2007)

As we mentioned earlier, queer concepts could be integrated into any of the four categories of employee groups presented earlier in the paper. For example, a conventional group might embrace transgender issues and form a coalition with disabled employees in calling for installation of private unisex restrooms. In fact, transgender issues are often seen as the new frontier in LGBTQ workplace activism (Out & Equal Workplace Advocates, 2006). This new focus on transgender issues certainly allows queer ideas of sexuality and gender to be integrated into groups taking more conventional approaches. However, using the concepts of queerness within an organization can be troubling to some, since it represents a domestication of the once-radical queer principles that led to direct action and arrests (Hill, 2004). In such case, for those seeking to break out of the confines of both organizational affiliation and structured groups, queer approaches allow workers to explore complicated aspects of sexuality without being bound to the conditional acceptance by the employing organizations.

Conclusion

By utilizing literature from the areas of employee activism, LGBT studies, queer studies, and organization theory, we provide a framework for understanding how these groups can be organized and the approaches they should take to foster change and education efforts. This exploration contributes to adult education through expanding the perspectives of social justice to include social change as driven by workers within organizations.

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