

A Model for Supporting LGBTQ+ Employees: Providing Safety, Equity, and Community

Excerpts from Panel Discussion

*The following are snippets from a panel discussion with **Jamie Bergeron**, Manager for the Americas Diversity, Equity and Inclusiveness Center of Excellence at EY US and **Bianca Robinson**, Associate Director, Inclusion, Diversity and Equity (ID&E) at Vertex Pharmaceuticals. The panel took place on November 15th, 2022 at our Fall Roundtable Meeting, following the release of the Center's executive briefing on supporting LGBTQ+ employees. Some of the panelists' comments have been edited for length and clarity.*

To download the executive briefing please visit the Center's [website](#).



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On educating employees and encouraging allyship...

BCCWF: Creating a more inclusive and respectful work environment for LGBTQ+ employees requires intentionality around building employees' cultural competence on LGBTQ+ issues and ways to encourage allyship. Could you tell us about some of your efforts around this topic?

JAMIE: I think this is such an important place to start. I love the framework that is part of the brief. All of those four pillars are really important, but I think the educational piece sort of unlocks what is possible in terms of changing culture, particularly in allowing spaces where people can make mistakes. At EY we have a program called Ally2Advocate. It's a self guided learning journey. We've provided the resources, the Ted Talks, the research reports, the information briefs for people to guide their own learning journey at their own pace. It is LGBT specific, but we've seen other professional networks - for example, our Black professional network and our Veterans network - engage with the Ally2Advocate program. There's the possibility of overlaying that experience, which makes the self-guided learning journey more personal to folks and also makes the content richer and more intersectional.

Another educational piece is our trans and gender diversity education work, which includes what we call sort of a "Trans 101." You know, what does it mean to be transgender? What are the needs and concerns of the trans and non binary populations? How is the workforce shifting in terms of gender fluidity and comfort around gender fluidity and dynamics?

BIANCA: We have a curriculum, and in that curriculum we have allyship training. The three pillars of that training are: intersectionality, taking action, and community work. We know intersectionality is incredibly important. Why it's so critical at this moment is because we need to recognize that even within the LGBTQ+ community, there is prejudice, and a lot of diversity. So intersectionality, I can't stress that enough. Then taking action - we need to also pivot what we're saying in terms of allyship. Part of what we're trying to do is really move the needle and say to folks, "allyship is an action, it's a behavior you need to do and demonstrate." We've been saying "let's all be allies" for such a long time, and really changing that and saying, "it's up to the community to recognize you as an ally based on your behaviors and your actions." And then, one pitfall folks really get wrong is that it's an individualistic approach - "I need to educate myself to ensure that I'm on the latest and greatest of allyship thought and theory." But really, this work is based on community. You need to go to community, you need to learn in community because that's the only way you can succeed in true allyship.

On showing up as an ally....

BCCWF: What are some things that each and every one of us can do to show up as an ally for our LGBTQ+ colleagues?

JAMIE: It's challenging ourselves to do more exactly in our spheres. So who is the LGBT person you know, and how are you ensuring that they get the promotion? Are you making that introduction to the senior leadership team, a team member that they need to know and build a relationship with to get leadership coaching that will get them to the next level? So I think it's, in part, going to all the trainings, showing up in all the right ways, advocating for benefits that serve our entire employee communities, but then spending a little extra time in our own spheres, to ask questions, make introductions, ensure that we're moving people forward.

On community partnerships and advocacy...

BCCWF: Could you tell us about the different ways in which EY and Vertex partner with LGBTQ+ advocacy and education organizations?

JAMIE: I think that partnerships are key and critical. And for organizations that are hesitant in terms of building partnerships, or feel restricted based on budgetary limitations to sponsor organizations, it really does limit our ability to do really good work for our people. I encourage folks to think outside of the sponsorship box. There are so many organizations that do a lot in kind, and will host mini consultation conversations with you on specific topics, regardless of whether you're able to be a corporate sponsor. One way that we focus on our sponsorships at EY is really ensuring that the sponsorship has a return on investment for our people, but most importantly, to the way that we do work. A good example here locally in Boston is an organization called GLAD (GLBTQ Legal Advocates &

Defenders). Through our relationship with them we've been able to educate our people and encourage our people to vote in their own communities. There's a real local approach to that collaboration. There are many LGBT organizations that are doing incredible work. There's HRC or Out and Equal, your local or national LGBT Chambers of Commerce, there are a lot of angles in terms of figuring out which might be right for your company. I think identifying what your current needs are, and then partnering with the right organization for different things is the best strategy and really continuing to ask them for more and not being shy: Can you educate our C-suite executives on this topic? Can we do a 30-minute presentation on a specific topic area? Can you do a training for our ERGs? Can you give us talking points on this issue?

BIANCA: Return on investment is key, and we're doing the same thing. Another thing that I would say is really staying attuned to the landscape and hiring LGBTQ community experts, because those are going to be the folks that have a broad network of knowledge and are part of multiple coalitions that can really assist a company in saying "yes, we should sponsor this organization," or "let's hold on that for a moment." So you have to be a part of that DEI LGBTQ expert network to really understand what is occurring locally, and then beyond that, it's important to keep an eye on what's happening nationally. For example, conversations with youth and trans issues - they represent a new generation that is quite different from the way that you understood trans folks in the past. This landscape is ever evolving. We have folks who, for example, transition and no longer want to be identified as LGBTQ, and other folks who are saying "I don't need to have a diagnosis to be trans," which is a really new thought. So again, the community experts are really in this coalition and have the knowledge, have the connections.

On navigating varying legal and cultural landscapes...

BCCWF: Can you tell us about how you've navigated the varying legal and cultural landscapes in the countries in which you operate and have employees?

BIANCA: If we think about it from a national level, we know there's an increase in anti trans bills, so one thing that we're doing is really staying abreast of decisions that are happening at the state level, and ensuring that we have access to benefits for all employees. On an international level, I think that it's important to keep in mind what actions we've taken. At Vertex, for example, we've decided to roll out pronoun options locally and we addressed that really sensitively with our legal team because we recognize that each country has its own regulations and laws and maybe even increasing LGBTQ violence. We want to ensure that our company is inclusive wherever you are.

JAMIE: I think there's a real strength in our collaboration with local organizations that are doing LGBT advocacy work. There are LGBT community organizations in every place around the world and our Talent and DEI contacts are able to connect people to local organizations or get resources when we need them, wherever our people are working. We want our people who are working internationally to

feel the same wherever they are, but when they're on client sites, when they're not within our EY walls, there are some serious conversations that we've had to have with people. I think our close partnership with our Risk and Safety offices and ensuring that they're culturally competent when it comes to LGBT inclusion has been really key. And we're really honest with our people - "it may be dangerous for you to be out where you're going" - and offering the possibility that they may choose not to go. But we do have folks who choose to take that risk. And so, arming folks with local resources, ensuring that people have multiple connection points locally in the place that they're traveling, but also leave the choice in their hands about how they want to navigate the landscape in terms of LGBT inclusion, and also their careers.

On talent management and equitable career development opportunities...

BCCWF: In the brief we talk about issues to consider when it comes to talent sourcing and selection and access to appropriate mentoring and sponsorship opportunities. What are some of the ways you've been able to integrate LGBTQ+ equity and inclusion efforts into your talent management strategy?

JAMIE: I think the category of mentorship and sponsorship is where we're really focused right now. Ensuring that the programs that we have for women, our racially and ethnically diverse populations, our Veterans population, are equally as available to people who are part of the LGBT community. We're in the beginning stages of that and part of that is some of the limitations of relying on self-ID. That requires us to be doing more to ensure that people feel really comfortable asking to be part of these programs or for teams to be able to easily identify folks who could be tagged for programs that are specifically meant to support underrepresented folks or historically marginalized groups, like with trans individuals. There's been a lot of success in the space of supporting women in the workplace - and we have a long way to go, don't get me wrong - but we have seen such great advances in embedding equity for women in talent management systems. Let's replicate all of that and go further for LGBT people, for queer women, for trans women, and ensure that we're doing that beyond just our language and pronouns. Just thinking deeper about the strategies that we've seen work really well, doubling down to ensure that LGBT women are seeing themselves reflected in these places.

BIANCA: One thing that we should keep in mind is that for a lot of queer people, continuing employment is absolutely crucial. We know from the briefing that employment rates are low, especially for trans and non binary folks. It is so difficult for them to find employment and keep employment (due to discrimination, poverty, housing insecurity, etc). So recognizing that it's up to us as employers to ensure that they are successful at work and that they are able to continue employment, because you really don't know what the landscape of their personal life looks like.

On building an inclusive culture...

BCCWF: In your opinion, what are the gaps that still remain when organizations are trying to build inclusive cultures for LGBTQ+ employees and what are your thoughts on how these can be overcome?

BIANCA: Recently, personally, I've been thinking a lot about counter narratives. So I've been following folks who have opposing views from me and what I teach and what I lead, and how I lead in our company from an LGBTQ subject matter expert perspective. So now I'm following a lot of those folks because I really would love to understand how they're positioning our identities, which will then strengthen the strategy for our company. So that's one piece. And then, I can't stress enough the intersectionality piece. I think it's important for us to be able to listen to folks in our organizations who are authentic and live their truth. And again, fostering intersectionality dialogue - finding those niche topics and highlighting those is a great way to begin to fill the gap.

JAMIE: I think there's a gap in figuring out how to ensure that our middle managers are able to really understand the power of their leadership, the power of their role modeling, the power of how they can and should be embedding equity into their team management, performance evaluations, ways they're building a partnership across the organization. And I think we spend a lot of time at the top of our organizations thinking through policies, advocacy efforts, budgeting questions, external partnerships, and maybe not as much time with our people in the middle, which is where culture is really created. I'd like us to be inspired to spend more time there and allow those middle management folks to lead because they're more connected than any generation before them - they have more facility in LGBT language, cultural competency, and are going to be able to get us where I know we all want to go, faster.