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The Reality of Diversity

By Dave Pallone



On November 30, 1988, at 11:30 in the morning, I learned what diversity truly meant. On that day and time, Major League Baseball fired me as a National League Umpire because of my sexual orientation. I never thought growing up that I could ever be discriminated against. I was a white male, somewhat middle class and longed for a career in professional baseball. When my dream came true at the age of nineteen, I was working as an umpire in professional baseball. My ultimate goal was achieved in 1979, when I became a major league umpire. It was hard to believe I wasn't dreaming. I was walking on baseball fields all across America, from New York to California. Calling plays for such teams as the LA Dodgers, the NY Mets, the Cincinnati Reds and the Chicago Cubs. And calling plays for such future hall of famers, as Willie McCovey, Nolan Ryan, Steve Carlton, Mike Schmidt and Pete Rose. I had it all. My childhood dream had come true, I was part of America's national pastime, and I was at the top of my profession. How could I ever know that my dream would be taken away just because of who I was? Yet at some level I must have imagined it because I had lived a secret life for 20 years.

My career was full of ups and downs. I was forced to live a double life, for all of those twenty years, just so that I could keep my childhood dream. The one I wanted since I was eleven years old. I had to fit into the box, that baseball and corporate America forces you to live in. If you don't fit in, if you don't conform, they snap it shut and you are not welcomed. That box becomes your closet, which is a very deep, dark and lonely one. So, if your desire is to fit in, you do whatever it takes. Which is to live a double life. It forces you to lie to your family, friends, and co-workers and most importantly to yourself. It affects your job performance, and for me that was an important issue. I was never truly comfortable on or off the baseball field. I was always worried that someone would find out about my secret life, and my career would be over. Then that fateful day came, and my life, my world, was taken away. Baseball, my corporate America, caught up with my secret life and proceeded to throw me out of the box and into the world I live in today.

Over the last decade, corporate America has taken many positive steps on behalf of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-gendered employee. Most of corporate America, as well as universities, colleges and municipalities have embraced the importance of respect for

all employees, and have started to educate their workforce about the realities of sexual orientation. However, there is still work to be done. The average employee is still in the dark about those realities. Companies and organizations are trying their best to work on their diversity programs that deal with sexual orientation, but at times are at a loss to know which direction they should follow. Should it be a mandatory program, or should it be voluntary? Should it be someone from within the company that helps to educate, or should he or she come from outside the company? Should the person who educates be gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans-gendered? Should they be heterosexual? What about those who have religious beliefs, about this subject? How do we handle the backlash? These questions, at best, are difficult to answer. However, we must first answer some questions on our own, to fully appreciate the plight of the employee who is gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans-gendered.

What Does Sexual Orientation Have To Do With Work?

How is your company or organization:

- a) Affected when an employee has to hide his/her orientation?
- b) Bottom line affected?
- c) As a company/organization, do you want your employee to be honest?
Hardworking? Feel like a part of the family?

Fast Fact: Everyone has a sexual orientation, and no one checks it-or any other significant part of who they are-at the door. The inability to freely express oneself appropriately has a seriously detrimental affect on performance, productivity and ultimately, profitability.

Do You Really Know What Sexual Orientation Is?

Does your company or organization and do its employees understand that:

- a) Sexual orientation cannot not be changed, and that increasing research shows a genetic base?
- b) All employees have a sexual orientation?
- c) Sexual orientation is explained as part of one's makeup and not a choice, most people will accept and understand sexual orientation.
- d) Most people think of a person who happens to be gay, lesbian, and bisexual as a sexual being and not a human being?

Fast Fact: Most people do not truly understand sexual orientation. They feel that sexual orientation pertains only to those who happen to be gay, lesbian or bisexual, and they forget that heterosexuality is a sexual orientation as well. And trans-gendered people, while typically included in all matters related to "gays" are an entirely different subject. (Did you know that over 90% of trans-gendered people are heterosexual?)

What Are the Real Consequences of Being Out...of Being Who You Really Are?

Does your company or organization understand:

- a) The underlying consequences when an employee has to hide their personal life to their fellow employees?
- b) That one result of forced hiding could be suicide?
- c) Employees hide their orientation due to the fact they might be ridiculed or passed over for a promotion?

Fast Fact: Any person, whose sexual orientation happens to not be heterosexual, runs many risks when they are open about their personal life. They risk the chance of losing the love of family members, the friendships they have developed at work, and their job. Most people do not realize that in 38 states it is legal to fire someone based on their sexual orientation. In 48 states, it is legal to do so based on gender identity.

How Does Discrimination Manifest Itself in a Workplace and What Can the Company or Organization Do about it?

Does your company or organization:

- a) Deal with all forms of discrimination, including sexual orientation?
- b) Lose the opportunity to attract new employees by not dealing with the issue of sexual orientation?
- c) Lose some of its employees because the issue of sexual orientation is not addressed?

Fast Fact: The US Constitution or any Federal Act does not provide workplace protection-much less civil protection, to US citizens on the basis of sexual orientation.

What Is The Best Way to Deal With Comments, Slanderous or Otherwise?

Does your company or organization:

- a) Have seminars/meetings for administrators/directors on how they should treat his/her employees?
- b) Have workshops for employees on how employees should respect/treat each other?
- c) Have a no tolerance policy to deal with disrespectful employees?
- d) Have consequences for non-compliance of the policies? Are they enforced?

Fast Fact: Most companies and organizations are now forming affinity groups to help employees understand their differences; also companies/organizations are forming “Safe Zones” which helps employees who happen to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual know that whoever displays this sign is an ally.

The Difference Between Straight/Gay People...Are There Any?

Does your company or organization understand:

- a) The difference?
- b) That employees who happen to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans-gendered live very productive lives?
- c) That most employees who happen to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans-gendered have life partners and are sometimes afraid to talk about them, unlike their heterosexual counterparts?

Fast Fact: The difference between straight and gay people is that gay people are not treated as equals. Most employers do not offer common employee benefits (aka: Domestic Partner Benefits).

Living a Secret Life...Think You Could?

Does your company or organization understand:

- a) That most people who happen to be gay, lesbian or bisexual live in a closet?
- b) That those employees who happen to be gay lesbian or bisexual are afraid to have a picture of a loved one on their desk?
- c) That when an employee lives in a closet they are actually living a double life?

Fast Fact: Living a double life is a hardship that no human being should have to endure. Many gay, lesbian and bisexual people have to hide their life from their families, friends and peers at work just to survive. We as people are taught not to lie, but in fact more than 40% of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people lie about their true self to at least one person with whom they work.

After the human resource professional and corporate America asks and answers these questions, we can begin to understand where we must go to make our workplace equal for all employees. We must remember that diversity is not an exclusionary thing, but that it is all-inclusive.

Mark Mathabane, the author of KAFFIR BOY recently said “that one is not fully human until one acknowledges and affirms the humanity of others.” We are all better human beings when we respect the humanity of others.

Dave Pallone

Dave Pallone is a former National League Umpire and the author of the NY Times’ Best-selling autobiography BEHIND THE MASK: My Double Life in Baseball, which has recently been republished. He is a diversity trainer on the issue of sexual orientation

For more information about Mr. Pallone’s program “Who’s Really on First” dealing with this issue, please contact him at palloned@aol.com or visit www.davepallone.com