
I'm Confused: How Failing to Value Sexual Identities at Work Sends Stakeholders Mixed Messages

SABRINA D. VOLPONE AND DEREK R. AVERY
University of Houston

In principle, we agree with King and Cortina (2010) that it is both an economic and social imperative for organizations to institute policies that support lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) employees. Ultimately, we believe that a failure to support LGBT employees through policies and other organization-wide initiatives sends a negative message to stakeholders concerning an organization's current diversity initiatives. Because stakeholders' perceptions affect organizational outcomes such as corporate image and customer purchasing decisions (Brickson, 2007), their perspectives should be considered in an organization's key operating decisions (e.g., initiating new policies). Thus, we extend King and Cortina's arguments to consider an unexplored economic and social impact of firms failing to employ LGBT-supportive policies: sending mixed messages to multiple stakeholders.

Mixed Diversity Messages

Organizations use policies as a way to communicate messages to employees and other stakeholders (e.g., the media, customers, shareholders). As Highhouse and Hoffman (2001) described, organizations use cues to send signals about their values to employees, who interpret them with heuristics (i.e., rules of thumb) that help them make sense of the organizational environment. Unfortunately, the literature suggests that many organizations are doing a poor job of sending clear signals where diversity is concerned (Avery & Johnson, 2007). It is often the case that employees and managers struggle with managing diversity as a consequence of having unclear and potentially conflicting goals and initiatives.

In the present case, the choice not to include LGBT policies as a part of an organization's diversity initiatives sends a mixed message to company stakeholders about current diversity efforts and the values of the company. For example, all companies are legally required to have policies in place to ensure the fair representation and treatment of multiple groups within the workforce (e.g., racioethnic, gender, religious groups). Consequently, companies have policies and procedures to manage diversity to abide by federal regulations. Therefore, when organizations elect not to have the same or similar policies and procedures in place for other groups (i.e., LGBT employees), they are sending (intentionally or inadvertently)

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sabrina D. Volpone.
E-mail: sabrinavolpone@aol.com

Address: Industrial/Organizational Psychology, Department of Psychology, University of Houston, 126 Heyne Building, Houston, TX 77024

Sabrina D. Volpone, Industrial/Organizational Psychology, Department of Psychology, University of Houston; Derek R. Avery, College of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences, C.T. Bauer College of Business, University of Houston.