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PRIDE, YEAR-ROUND: BEST PRACTICES FOR EMPLOYERS IN CREATING LGBTQ+ INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE CULTURES

Every June, Pride Month is a time to celebrate the LGBTQ+ community. In 2020, Pride Month was particularly momentous as the U.S. Supreme Court declared in the case of *Bostock v. Clayton* that Title VII, the federal law prohibiting employment discrimination and harassment in the workplace based on certain protected categories, extends its protection to sexual orientation and gender identity.

LGBTQ+ individuals have long had a complicated relationship with their workplaces. In recent years, while LGBTQ+ individuals have grown increasingly comfortable being "out" at work, many across the country continue to experience apprehension about the consequences of doing so and therefore elect to keep their sexual orientation and/or gender identity hidden. As a result, their work may suffer, or they may leave their positions at higher rates. Employers can enact several best practices to retain these employees and promote an overall LGBTQ+ inclusive workplace culture. Beyond formal changes to policy or employee benefits, this article focuses on workplace culture changes employers can implement to foster a more inclusive environment. It provides only a few of many options that exist. If adopted, they benefit not only LGBTQ+ employees, but the organization as a whole.

1.   Encourage Identification and Use of Preferred Pronouns

The LGBTQ+ community champions the idea that gender is not a binary system of "he" and "she", but instead a spectrum of gender identities. Some individuals don't feel as if they belong to one gender, but rather multiple. As such, they may elect to use gender-neutral pronouns such as "they", "them", or "theirs". Employers can demonstrate their sensitivity to the idea of gender as a spectrum in two ways: encourage employees to identify their preferred pronouns when introducing themselves and encourage employees to include their preferred pronouns in email signatures. Doing so not only sends the message that employers are aware of the complexities within the LGBTQ+ community, but also that they encourage employees to present their full selves while at work.

2.   Create and Support Employee Resource or Affinity Groups

Feeling a sense of community at work matters. Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) and Affinity Groups represent one avenue through which employers can carve out space for self-identified LGBTQ+ individuals and their allies in the workplace. ERGs can facilitate connection amongst the workplace LGBTQ+ and ally community through events such as lunches, dinners, or other outings. They also can establish a coalition for the group to unite under and provide input to management about priorities and other concerns. While ERGs and Affinity Groups may not be viable for all employers, particularly smaller ones,

they nonetheless represent a concrete step employers can take towards translating their articulated commitment to inclusion into practice.

3.   Promote LGBTQ+ Individuals to Leadership Roles

In addition to community, visibility also matters at work. Employers can demonstrate their commitment to LGBTQ+ inclusivity by ensuring that LGBTQ+ individuals are promoted to leadership roles and have a voice in the organization. Doing so serves multiple purposes. It leads to better overall outcomes from having more diverse perspectives involved in high-level decision-making. It also sends the message to more junior LGBTQ+ employees that the organization is invested in their advancement. Some LGBTQ+ individuals may need to "see it to believe it" when it comes to their professional development at an organization. When employees see such reassurance from their employer about the value of their contributions, their work benefits and they are more likely to remain at the organization. Finally, from an outside perspective, having LGBTQ+ leaders in senior-level roles demonstrates the organization's commitment to inclusivity for prospective employees and the larger community.

4.   Display Symbols of Inclusion

Sometimes actions speak louder than words. Similar to ERGs and Affinity Groups, underrepresented groups such as the LGBTQ+ community benefit from physical symbols reassuring them of their employer's commitment to cultivating an inclusive workplace. A variety of these symbols exist in various forms. For example, employers may permit employees to place "Safe Zone" stickers on or near office doors where appropriate and consistent with workplace policy. They may post these materials, an image of a rainbow flag, or other images associated with LGBTQ+ inclusivity in office breakrooms or kitchens. Finally, employers may permit employees to place rainbow flags or other symbols on office ID badges. Such symbols serve as quick and effective reminders to employees that the workplace celebrates the contributions of its LGBTQ+ community.

5.   Model Inclusivity and Sensitivity from Above

Senior leaders set the tone for any organization. Through their actions, they convey both directly and indirectly the priorities of an organization. For an employer to effectively create an inclusive workplace environment for LGBTQ+ individuals, they need buy-in from senior leadership. A trickle-down effect results: when employees observe leadership stating their preferred pronouns, highlighting the work of an ERG or Affinity Group, celebrating the promotion of an LGBTQ+ individual, or displaying a rainbow flag in their office, they are more likely to do the same. Such efforts from above are needed for any inclusivity efforts. They are the foundation of lasting cultural change.