

Coming out of the closet in the workplace

QUESTION:

I have a colleague at work who I think is gay but he never talks about his personal life. I don't know how to let him know that he could tell me if he wanted and that I would be fine with it. He always comes to our office parties etc., alone. I don't want to offend him or put him in an awkward position by asking him directly. Any advice?

Answer:

There are many people like you who want to be supportive of individuals in their lives who are gay (and for this article let's assume you're right about your colleague's sexual orientation) but who just aren't sure how to do so in a way that would be supportive and helpful.

Let me first say that there are many legitimate reasons why people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT) don't want to be open about their sexual orientation or gender identity at work or in their personal lives. These reasons can range from discrimination at work leading to a hostile work environment, negative impact on career and promotions, loss of relationships with friends and family, and in the extreme, violence.

Yes, there has been tremendous progress over the years in



our society that has granted increased protection and rights to those individuals who identify as LGBT, but coming out can still, at times, be a legitimately risky thing to do.

The other thing to keep in mind is that LGBT individuals need to be personally ready to tell other people about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. They may have a sense of shame, guilt, or ambivalence and while people in their lives (like you) may be ready to talk about it, they may not be. It is important to remember that these feelings are not related to sexual orientation and/or gender identity in itself. They are related to our society's entrenched belief system (heterosexism) that says being heterosexual is "good,"

and homosexual is "bad." And for transgendered individuals, our society's belief system that does not support anyone who lives outside the norms of "acceptable" gender identity and expression. This colleague of yours has probably endured years of questions like "do you have a girlfriend?" The world is set up to support heterosexuality, not homosexuality or varied gender identities and expressions.

Now before I paint a completely negative picture, let me first say that there are a significant majority of LGBT individuals who are thriving in our society. They are having children, enjoying successful careers, enjoying positive relationships with their families, getting married and just being ordinary happy people. They are talking openly about their lives and it is no longer a big deal to them or to those they are telling.

So, let me assume that your colleague is working in a fair and equitable work environment and that he is ready to come out but is just not sure how to do it. I think this is true for many individuals, particularly if they have been working for an organization for a while and have been intentionally misleading their colleagues. This is what I would sug-

gest. First, use the word partner when you are referring to your significant other or for any other reference to a person in a relationship. This is usually interpreted by others to mean that you are not assuming that one's partner is either male or female. You will be hinting to your colleague that you are not assuming whether he has a male or female partner.

Second, when you have the opportunity to mention a movie or television show with a gay character or theme do so openly and simply. Ellen DeGeneres has been very helpful in this regard. Say something to your colleague like, "Did you see the Ellen show where she had her partner Portia on? They are a great couple." Anything like this helps your colleague know that you would be supportive of him if he decided to tell you. You can also use the true and tested, "I have a friend who is gay who lives in Vancouver and . . ." This is a big tip-off that you are wondering and would be very supportive if told.

Lastly, and this might seem painfully simple, but you could

just ask him. Some might find this a bit radical, but if we believe that there is nothing wrong with being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered, what

would be wrong with asking? If he's not gay, why do we expect that he would be offended?

See LGBT page 20

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Team effort

B.C. Children's Hospital Cystic Fibrosis clinic researcher Dr. James Zlosnik (left) and 13-year-old North Vancouver resident Alex Stedman spend some time together at the hospital. Zlosnik is participating in GearUp4CF, a grueling 1,200-kilometre ride across the province June 20-29 on behalf of Stedman, who was diagnosed with the disease when he was three months old. Funds raised from the journey will go to the Canadian Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. For more information, or to make a donation, visit www.gearup4cf.org.



photo courtesy of the Child & Family Research Institute

Gear up for a great season

From page 17

yourself, these types of events are a great way to actually measure differences in equipment.

When trying a boat, the first thing you should look for is comfort as this will allow you to paddle more efficiently. All kayaks will feel unstable at first so resist the temptation to get a boat that feels really stable right off the bat as these types of boats can flip more easily when the ocean or lake you paddle on gets rough. A boat with more movement will feel less stable at first but will feel more stable as your ability improves and will handle choppy water better.

Your paddle is the most important piece of gear. Most recreational paddles out there are too long and too heavy to be efficient. Your paddle should be no longer than 218 centimetres and this does not change regardless of boat width or type. Many paddlers still resist wing paddles, which are used by the fastest paddlers on earth. A wing blade is built like the wing of an airplane and will immediately improve any paddler's efficiency by 10 per cent. Many people are resistant

to these paddles because they cost more and many shops still promote them as racer paddles and say that you can't Eskimo Roll or brace with them. All of these are falsehoods.

I've had my Epic Wing paddle for more than 10 years and used it with everything from paddling the Bowron Lakes in a day to four eco-challenges and it still looks like new, so the \$500 was very well-spent. Try a wing paddle and you will never go back!

There will also be clothing and personal flotation devices to try on at the Paddlefest to enable you to find the best-fitting and most comfortable gear that allows you to move in an unrestricted manner. Your time out on the water is important and having the best gear will allow you to have fun and that is the most important thing.

Find info on the MEC Paddlefest, running from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., at www.mec.ca. Adventurer Dave Norona loves being out on the water and hopes to see you out there on his early morning stand-up sessions. He is supported by Advil, Merrell Footwear, and Seymour Bean. Visit www.noronalife.com/blog for more info.

LGBT individuals encouraged to call

From page 19

Yes, be careful here, but I am assuming you have an established personal relationship and that you are talking about many personal things all the time. You could start with an easier question like, "I realize that I am always talking about my relationships and you don't talk

about yours?"

If he is very closed or defensive, then you know not to go any further.

On a separate note, if you are reading this and are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or questioning, and feel alone, isolated, depressed, or confused, or just need to talk to someone, give us a call at Fam-

ily Services of the North Shore. All of our services are open and accessible to you and your family. We are here to help.

Julia Staub-French, M.A., R.C.C., director of clinical programs at Family Services of the North Shore. Questions? Write onthecouch@familyservices.bc.ca or call 604-988-5281.

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