Harvard
Business
Review

LGBT Rights

Creating a Trans-Inclusive Workplace

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From the Magazine (March–April 2020)

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Summary. Trans people often experience stigma and discrimination, hostility from others, and pressure to "manage" their identities in social settings, including the workplace. These experiences can set in motion a host of psychological responses that have devastating... **more**

For most of us, work is stressful in and of itself. Imagine carrying the added emotional weight of having to deny and suppress one of the most fundamental aspects of who you are—your gender identity—because it doesn't conform with society's norms regarding gender expression. And imagine how it would feel if

you revealed your authentic self to those you work with and see every day, only to have them reject, ostracize, or ignore you as a result. (Maybe you do not have to imagine at all.)

These issues are pervasive for many trans people, who often experience stigma and discrimination, hostility, and pressure to "manage" their identities in social settings—including the workplace—to suit the expectations of others. Such experiences can set in motion a host of psychological responses that have devastating consequences for trans individuals' emotional well-being, job satisfaction, and inclination to remain with an employer.

Despite a growing global awareness of the struggles trans people face, many employers remain ill-equipped to create the policies and workplace cultures that would support trans employees. Part of the problem is a lack of knowledge about these challenges. Indeed, even companies that are LGBTQ+-friendly usually focus more on the "LGB" than on the "TQ+."

The overriding reason to address this issue is that it's simply the right thing to do. Nobody who works hard and contributes to an organization's success should ever have to feel stigmatized and fearful of coming to work each day. But that's not the only reason. A failure to adopt trans-specific policies and practices can cost businesses dearly in the form of higher turnover, decreased engagement and productivity, and possible litigation. Discriminatory behavior in general also hurts the company's brand.

Fortunately, research on how employers can more effectively attract, retain, and promote the well-being and success of their trans employees is growing. Although we are not members of the trans community, we've spent the past seven years learning from a diverse population of trans people in the course of our research as organizational psychologists specializing in gender-related issues. We've interviewed and surveyed more than 1,000 trans employees from a range of industries and professions throughout North America. In this article we share their voices and experiences and outline what we've learned.

The Roots of Stigma and Discrimination

Why do trans individuals so often face stigma and discrimination? The answer resides in how people are socialized to understand and enact gender. A large body of scholarly research in social and developmental psychology has demonstrated that gendered behavior is *learned*: From a young age, boys and girls are encouraged to display stereotypically gendered behaviors and discouraged from displaying non-normative ones. Just think about the tradition of giving pink items to baby girls and blue items to baby boys. The preference for these colors has no biological roots; in fact, pink was once considered the more "masculine" color. Yet over time little boys come to prefer blue and little girls come to prefer pink; they are subtly rewarded for liking their respective colors and may even be chastised for liking the other color. Moreover, children pick up on subtle signals from their parents and important others who enforce gender stereotypes. For example, when donning female garments during dress-up, girls might be told they look pretty, while boys might be told they look silly. Children seek to fulfill gender expectations in order to secure parental and, later, peer acceptance. As we grow up, it becomes difficult to distinguish between expressions of gender we actually prefer and those we have been socially rewarded for.

As a result of this socialization, gender norms provide perhaps the most basic organizing framework by which people define themselves and others. And because they are widely shared and deeply rooted, they are extremely difficult to change. Thus trans people face a unique quandary. For example, when a trans woman —whose sex was assigned male at birth and who knows herself to be female—adopts typically female clothing and jewelry, she breaks with expectations regarding how she should define and express her gender.

Unfortunately, such situations most often mean that trans individuals are stigmatized—that is, socially devalued—providing a basis for discrimination against them. Studies suggest that the costs of that stigma and discrimination are steep. For example, a 2015 survey of 27,715 trans individuals residing in the United States revealed that a staggering 77% of those who had held a job in the year prior took active steps to avoid mistreatment at work, such as hiding their gender identity, delaying their gender transition (or living as their true selves only after work and on weekends), refraining from asking their employers to use their correct pronouns (*he, she, they, ze*), or quitting their jobs. Sixty-seven percent reported negative outcomes such as being fired or forced to resign, not being hired, or being denied a promotion. And nearly a quarter reported other types of mistreatment based on their gender identity or expression—for example, being required to present as the sex assigned to them at birth to keep a job, having private information about their trans identity shared without permission, or being denied access to bathrooms that align with their gender identity. Such experiences may be compounded for a trans person who holds more than one stigmatized identity—for example, a black trans woman.

A lack of trans-specific policies can lead to higher turnover and even

litigation.

Research also suggests that stigma and discrimination can result in ruminative thoughts, a negative self-image, hopelessness, social isolation, and alcohol abuse or other dysfunctional coping behaviors. Such responses pave the way for even greater mental health challenges, including major depression and anxiety.

In one of our own investigations, we collected daily survey data from 105 trans employees in the United States across two workweeks. The results revealed that 47% of participants experienced at least some discriminatory behavior on a daily basis at work, such as being the target of transphobic remarks, being ignored, or being pressured to act in "traditionally gendered" ways. They reported robust increases in hypervigilance and rumination at work the day following such an experience. The extent to which they had to be "on guard" around their coworkers and try to make sense of negative events predicted their emotional exhaustion during the workday.

In another study, this one involving 165 trans employees from various industries and occupations in North America, we replicated those results and extended them to other outcomes, including diminished job satisfaction and a greater desire to quit. One trans woman, an educator, who felt deeply unsupported by the administration after she reported being harassed, told us, "Students were being removed from my class, rumors were spread about me, and it just wasn't a great place to be working anymore." Another trans woman, who worked in retail, recalled that her direct supervisor joked about trans individuals and that customers would tell her not to bring her "lifestyle" into the workplace. As a result, she said, "I'm constantly aware of who is around me at all times. And when I'm around other people, it makes me very unsettled." A trans man in the business sector echoed this intense sense of distress: "Most of my stress that

comes from work is related to just anxiety and worry [about interactions with coworkers], just constantly wondering about things that have happened and what might happen."

Employers should be aware of the business costs of ignoring these issues. A March 2012 report by the Center for American Progress indicated that companies in the United States lose an estimated $64 billion annually as a result of having to replace employees who departed because of unfairness and discrimination; many of those individuals were members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Hostility and discrimination also increase absenteeism, undermine commitment and motivation, and decrease productivity. A recent study by the Human Rights Campaign found that employee engagement declines by as much as 30% in unfriendly work environments. Although the study focused on LGBTQ+ employees more broadly, its findings are no doubt representative of trans people's experiences. In addition to hiding who they are at work, which LGB individuals often must do with respect to their sexual identity, trans people must hide their gender expression, including how they dress, speak, and present themselves.

Discriminatory workplaces also prevent companies from attracting and retaining top talent. When employers, whether knowingly or unknowingly, fail to address prejudicial behavior, they send a potent message about their indifference and develop an external reputation for being an unwelcoming place to work. (According to the Level Playing Field Institute, one in four people who experience unfairness in the workplace report being highly unlikely to recommend their organization to others.) Furthermore, laws relating to gender identity and expression, although still severely lacking in the aggregate, are evolving at the local, state, and federal levels—creating greater obligations for employers. Without comprehensive strategies for addressing issues around gender identity and expression, organizations risk being sued. Those legal actions can be expensive to litigate,

distracting to business activities, and damaging to a company's reputation, in addition to involving costly payouts. But it is our hope that companies will approach trans inclusivity from a moral and ethical standpoint rather than a purely economic one.

Supporting Your Trans Workforce

Organizations should not wait for the courts to determine that trans individuals are fully protected under the law. Instead they should proactively incorporate gender-identity-specific nondiscrimination policies and practices throughout their businesses. That involves two key issues: protecting and promoting the rights of people of all gender identities and expressions, and increasing employees' understanding and acceptance of their trans colleagues. In a meta-analysis we conducted with Cheryl Maranto and Gary Adams, we found strong links between the degree to which employers enact these practices and the job attitudes, psychological well-being, and disclosure decisions of LGBTQ+ community members. In another study, focused specifically on trans employees, Enrica Ruggs and her coauthors found that the presence of trans-supportive policies was positively related to participants' openness about their identities and their decreased experiences of discrimination at work. However, such effects are likely to occur only when leaders model these policies consistently in both words and behavior. Also, it should be noted that effective diversity and equity practices have been found to positively impact the productivity of all employees.

Gender Expression and Employment Law

Laws regarding gender and gender expression are constantly evolving and differ according to location. In the ...

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Here are four practices that we recommend employers adopt. Further resources can be found through professional associations such as the Society for Human Resource Management and nonprofit organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign, Out & Equal, and the Transgender Law Center.

1. Adopt Basic Trans-Inclusive Policies

An extensive body of social psychology research suggests that human beings are highly attuned to signals regarding the value ascribed to them by others. To one degree or another, we all have a basic need to belong and a prewired, unconscious monitoring system that tracks the quality of our relationships. When we detect signs of social devaluation (apathy, disapproval, or rejection), we experience negative emotions and a loss of self-esteem. When we detect signs of social valuation (praise, affection, or admission to a desired group), just the opposite occurs. Thus inclusive policies and practices—such as those related to bathroom access, dress codes, and pronoun and name usage—send vital messages to trans employees about their value as organizational members.

Bathroom access.

Instituting gender-neutral bathrooms or encouraging trans employees to use bathrooms that align with their gender identity is one important way to signal to those employees that they are

valued. Diversity trainings should educate other employees on the importance of being accepting and welcoming when they find themselves in a company bathroom with a trans coworker. One of our participants, a trans man working in business, said, "When I started using the men's room at work, a number of men didn't like it. An engineer, a cisgender man in his forties who didn't work with me directly, went out of his way to make me feel safe and welcome in the men's room, and I was extremely grateful."

Some have suggested that allowing employees to use bathrooms that align with their gender identity will increase the risk of sexual harassment and assault against women. But a 2018 report published in *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* suggests that such incidents in bathrooms are rare, regardless of any gender-identity policy on bathroom usage. In fact, harassment and assault generally are most often perpetrated by straight, cisgender males against straight, cisgender females.

Dress codes.

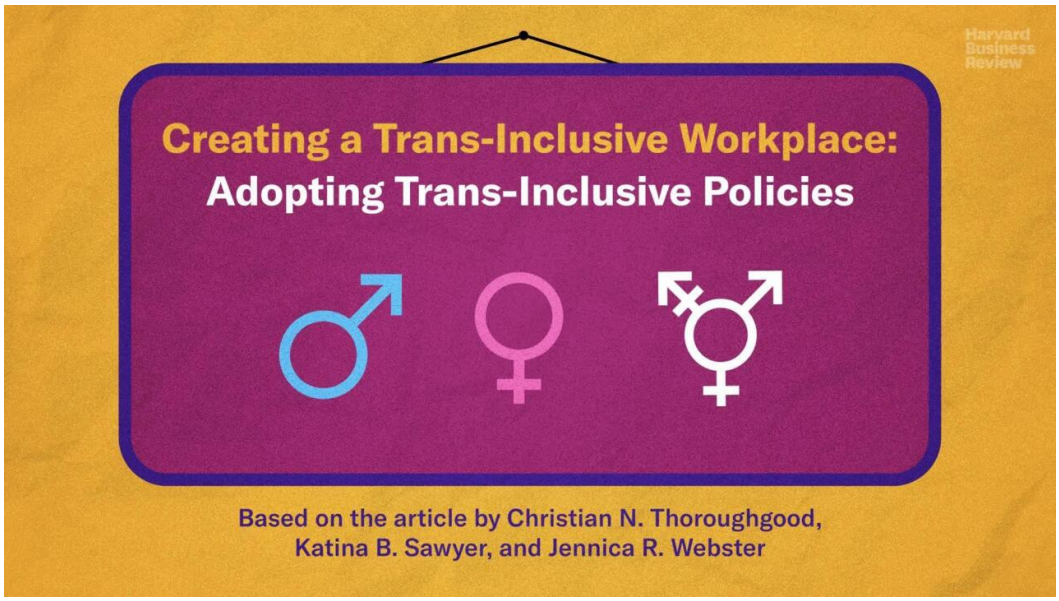
Some organizations, including Accenture, have begun to regionally implement gender-neutral dress codes. By making explicit that all employees may select from a range of options, such as dress shirts, pantsuits, and skirt suits, companies can help destigmatize varying expressions of gender. Such policies may also aid in recruitment and retention by signaling that normativity is not expected.

Pronoun and name usage.

Another way to signal to trans employees that they are valued is to pay serious attention to their correct names and pronouns. Many trans people identify on the traditional binary scale—as either male or female—and thus use *he, him,* and *his* or *she, her,* and *hers* as pronouns. Yet many others who also fall under the broad

category “trans”—such as genderqueer, gender-fluid, and nonbinary individuals—use alternative pronouns, such as *they, them,* and *theirs* or *ze, zir,* and *zem*.

It’s clear from our conversations and research that the “misgendering” of trans employees, whether intentional or unintentional, is relatively common at work. A onetime slipup—such as using an incorrect pronoun for a colleague who has recently transitioned—may be considered an honest mistake. (One should apologize, move on, and make sure to get it right the next time.) Using the right pronouns and names on a regular basis can be more meaningful than one might think. When asked to reflect on courageous acts coworkers had performed in support of the rights of trans employees, many of our participants recalled instances in which a cisgender employee guided others on proper pronoun usage. A simple “Katie uses ‘she’ as a pronoun” works, as does a gentle correction: “Have you seen him?” “Yes, I saw her in the conference room.”



Employers can address this issue in several ways. First, they can keep records of employees’ chosen names and correct pronouns; this helps ensure that whenever possible, appropriate terms will be used for personnel and administrative purposes, such as directories, email addresses, and business cards. Second, encourage all employees to use name badges and email signatures

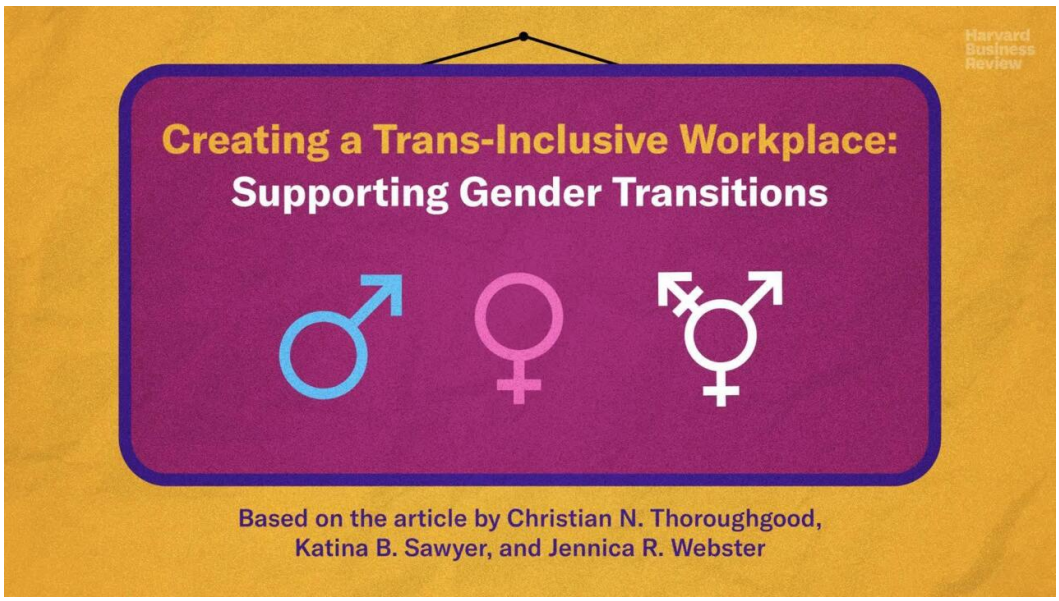
that include their desired names and correct pronouns; this enables people to learn those names and pronouns and cultivates awareness of the varying gender identities that colleagues may possess. Third, take advantage of training programs, onboarding initiatives, and employee handbook content to make clear that proper pronoun usage is part of creating an environment in which all employees feel valued and respected. Goldman Sachs, for example, recently launched an internal campaign to make employees more aware of the importance of pronouns and to encourage them to proactively share their pronouns with colleagues.

2. Support Gender Transitions

Transitioning is not a single event but, rather, a *process,* which begins with a deeply personal decision that usually results from years of soul-searching. The decision to come out, or disclose, at work is also complicated. People weigh the positive consequences of doing so (freedom from living a "double life" and expression of one's true self) against the negative ones (potential rejection and career ramifications). One of our study participants, a trans woman in the transportation industry, told us, "After nearly a year of soul-searching, research, therapy, support group attendance, and deep personal reflection, I 'came out' to my supervisor as transgender....I finished talking, paused, and waited for her reply. My heart was in my throat. I knew this meeting might forever change the way she thought of me, and that I could not un-say what had been said."

Then the woman recounted her boss's reaction: "After a few moments, her very first words were 'We're not just a team here, we're a family, and this is your home. You have the right to be who you are and to be treated with respect and dignity. I will do everything I can to make sure your transition is as smooth and trouble-free as it can be.' She then got busy arranging meetings with the head of the department and the head of HR."

Someone deciding to transition chooses what that process will look like and how long it will take. A transition may involve gender-confirmation surgery (not all trans people undergo medical procedures). Some gender-fluid individuals spend their lives transitioning between and within various gender expressions, as they continually reinterpret and redefine themselves. Employers must develop a comprehensive approach to managing gender transitions—one that focuses on the employee but also on cultivating a work environment conducive to the transition process.



First, helping transitioning employees who elect medical procedures to cover costs—and making sure they have access to health care benefits that are gender-identity-specific—can reduce the stress and anxiety of coming out at work. Such commitment sends a highly affirming message to trans employees about their value.

Second, it is paramount that employees be asked what they need during their transitions and how they would like the process handled. Only by listening to and collaborating with them can employers ensure that people are not inadvertently "outed" without permission or before they're ready.

Third, if approached by an employee, an HR manager can provide information concerning where to learn more about treatment options, organizational support groups, and other available resources and can develop strategies to help the employee manage work/life issues that may arise during the process. Including direct supervisors in such meetings, if the employee feels comfortable with this, can promote empathy and aid in crafting flexible and informed plans adapted to each individual's unique needs. Google, Cigna, and Chevron have implemented such initiatives.

Fourth, and equally important, our research suggests that leaders and managers must proactively cultivate a supportive work environment. The period of transitioning is particularly sensitive; indeed, individuals may be ostracized or pressured by peers to suppress their identities during this time, increasing their susceptibility to depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thinking. Moreover, any trans person seeking surgery will be questioned by the surgical team about the existence of support networks, which are often required for someone who is seeking gender-confirming procedures. Thus having supportive policies and plans in place will remove one or more barriers to care for trans employees.

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Authority figures who model trans-inclusive behaviors on a consistent basis are crucial to creating a supportive environment. Many of our participants said they would not have felt comfortable inquiring about transition benefits, much less been successful in their transitions, if senior leaders and frontline managers had not shown support, which tends to have a trickle-down effect on lower-level employees. Top leaders can do this in various ways, such as by attending or presenting at conferences about trans-specific issues, publicly championing gender-inclusive dress codes and bathroom usage initiatives, and using their correct names and gender pronouns.

Of course coworkers play a key role as well. In a recent study using interview and survey data from 389 trans employees and conducted with Larry Martinez, Enrica Ruggs, and Nicholas Smith, we found that those who were relatively far along in their transitions were more satisfied with their jobs, felt a greater sense of "fit" in their workplaces, and reported less discrimination than those who had not transitioned or were less far along in the process. We also found that this effect was explained *not* by participants' sense of consistency between their inner gender identity and their outward expression of gender—what is referred to as *action authenticity*—but, rather, by the perception that coworkers had the same understanding of their gender that the participants did, which is known as *relational authenticity*. One participant, a trans man who works as a museum curator, said, "There was a point where people started seeing me as just one of the guys. And I think that at that point I started feeling like I fit in a lot better. It's the individuals [coworkers] who make that possible." In a poignant example from a separate study, a trans woman in manufacturing reported a moment at a company function: "I appeared in a dress for the first time at a party. One of the housekeeping aides grabbed my hand and pulled me onto the dance floor in front of everyone. His courage in accepting who I was in front of all our coworkers can bring me to tears to this day."

To help in cultivating supportive relationships, work groups should be told when those who are transitioning will be out of the office, whether they will return part-time, and what work will have to be covered during their absence. Emphasizing the need for coworkers to show sensitivity, provide emotional support, and act in ways that affirm the gender identity of their colleagues is crucial. For example, people can make it clear that they are available to talk about any issues related to transitioning or gender expression—while following trans employees' lead about when and where to have those conversations. That approach enhances feelings of support and care and allows trans employees to be comfortable having honest conversations with their

colleagues. Even well-intentioned employees may be nervous about their ability to support a colleague through a transition, and employers can help ease some of their anxiety by taking the above steps.

3. Develop Trans-Specific Diversity Training

More general training on gender-identity topics is also essential. Although media coverage has helped facilitate conversations about gender identity and expression, corporate diversity trainings still have room for improvement. We offer two recommendations:

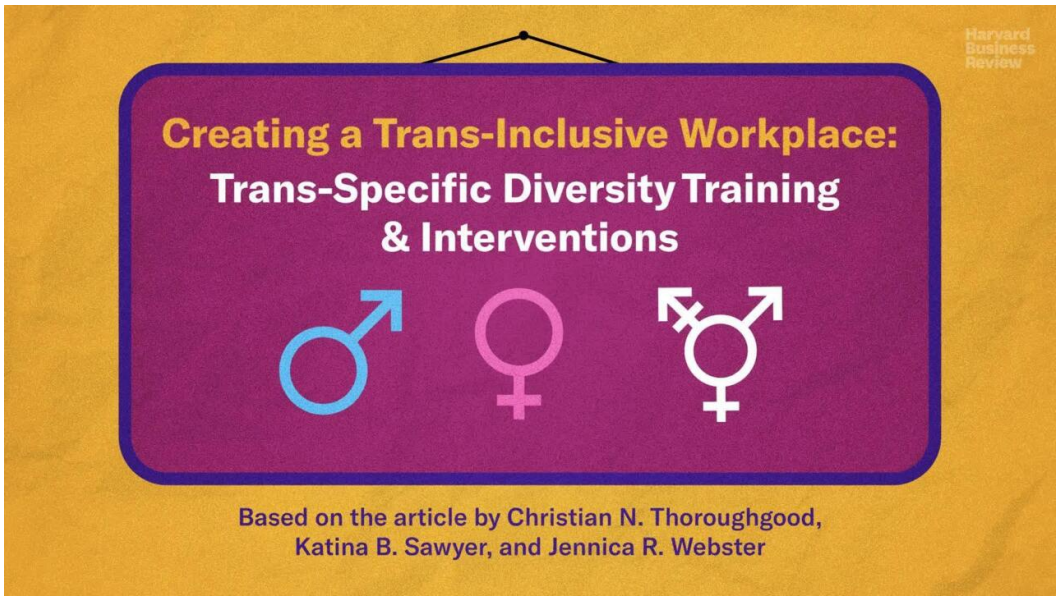
1. Include contact with those who identify along the trans identity spectrum.

A large body of research on the "contact hypothesis" suggests that providing opportunities to build relationships with specific groups—to hear their stories, appreciate their challenges, and gain empathy—is critical for shifting attitudes and behavior toward them. However, it is not the responsibility of members of the LGBTQ+ community to educate others or to be visible in this way; "out" trans employees should be included in trainings only if they are willing. If they're not, many corporate training firms and LGBTQ+ nonprofit organizations offer training of this nature.

2. Help cisgender employees develop the skills to become informal champions of their transgender colleagues.

Research suggests that many people lack the knowledge and confidence to challenge prejudice. That's why some companies have sought to equip their employees, especially leaders, with concrete strategies for stepping out of their comfort zones and engaging in "courageous conversations" regarding difficult diversity-related topics. For example, an employee who witnesses biased behavior is encouraged to respectfully but directly call it out. That might mean pulling someone aside to explain the potential damage from a biased comment, or having coffee with

someone to tactfully share why a behavior was noninclusive. The chairman of PwC launched the CEO Action for Diversity & Inclusion coalition to normalize diversity-related conversations across top-level leaders in large companies. At Bank of America employees are encouraged to discuss gender, race, and other identity-related issues in a respectful, learning-focused manner.



These efforts pay off. In a forthcoming study we will report that cisgender employees who challenge noninclusive policies and behavior send an important message of inclusion to their trans colleagues. Our findings suggest that these behaviors may come in three related forms: *advocacy,* such as taking the initiative to publicly support trans causes; *defending,* such as protecting trans coworkers from judgment or hostility; and *educating,* such as spreading awareness of trans issues in the organization. We found that trans individuals who had recently witnessed these behaviors tended to report an increased sense of worth as organizational members, were more satisfied with their jobs, and were less emotionally depleted by work.

One trans man in government recalled feeling immense gratitude toward his assistant when she spoke out after he was treated poorly by a manager. “This came about as I sat at a lunch table at an empty chair,” he recalled. “When he saw I was sitting there, [he] jumped up like he had sat next to a very large spider. She [my

assistant] voiced, 'Scott, that was so rude'—twice! That brought me to an island of relief." Courageous acts like this predicted individuals' job satisfaction and well-being a full six weeks later.

Gender Identity and Expression: A Glossary

People have differing language to describe who they are and how they want to label their identities. The terms below are ...

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Despite the good intentions of many cisgender employees, however, trans people may not always want others to represent their interests, especially when those others lack in-depth knowledge of the various issues, challenges, and nuances surrounding their work and life experiences. And research suggests that employees who possess a "savior mentality" (that is, are motivated by a desire to be perceived as good people) may end up doing more harm than good. Accordingly, HR practitioners should train employees to appropriately ask whether trans colleagues prefer to speak up for themselves. (If they wish to be, trans employees should be involved in this training.) The simple act of consulting before taking action gives a trans person agency and autonomy in deciding how the situation should be handled.

4. Utilize Interventions to Build Resiliency

Research also supports the idea that trans individuals can benefit from interventions to help them manage their stress. In a recent two-week experience sampling study of ours, we found evidence to suggest that mindfulness—a state of nonjudgmental attention to present-moment experiences—can insulate trans employees from emotional exhaustion the day after experiencing a

stigmatizing event at work. This effect was explained by a reduction in defensive, distrustful patterns of thinking such as hypervigilance and rumination.

Unfortunately, it's not realistic to assume that prejudice toward trans employees will be eliminated quickly and easily through workplace initiatives. Such changes take time. And although the main goal of employers should be to root out prejudice at a structural level through formal diversity policies and practices, it's also important to offer tools—such as mindfulness training, cognitive behavioral training, and self-compassion training—for reducing the harmful outcomes that stigma creates in marginalized populations.

CONCLUSION

Only when people feel totally authentic and connected with their organizations can they achieve their full potential at work. Trans employees are no exception. Yet few companies have succeeded in creating an inclusive work environment for people who don't identify with societal gender norms. We hope that the research and the proactive steps we've outlined will help change that. Employers that get this right aren't just being savvy from a business standpoint. They are also crafting a corporate legacy—one in which human dignity is prioritized and doing the right thing by employees is regarded as fundamental to success.

Editor's note: In two instances, this article referred to "preferred names" or "preferred pronouns." These names and pronouns aren't, in fact, preferred; they are simply the correct names and pronouns for individuals. The article has been updated accordingly.

A version of this article appeared in the March–April 2020 issue of *Harvard Business Review*.

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