A Reality Check for D & I Programs

One of our LGBTQ+ members who is a first officer in one of Canada's leading airlines has detailed a number of situations showing homophobic or uncomfortable actions which he has experienced in the cockpit or on layovers. All this occurred in just the past year in an airline which has a robust Diversity and Inclusion program and is considered LGBTQ+ friendly. We hope that this article will give some insights.

On one flight the cockpit conversation turned towards politics, a topic not often avoided, surprisingly. Most of the pilots I fly with lean strongly towards the right. Somehow (without his being aware of my own orientation) the topic of gender and labels came up, and the crew member I was flying with made it clear that "*no government would ever be telling him what to call someone*" and that he believed that that was when critical thinking ended.

On another recent flight, I was with a pilot on a layover, and was taking a video of a musician in a pub. The captain I was with, in an attempt to be funny, said "*I was going to yell 'My first officer is gay!'* (inserting his name), *but then I thought everyone would look and laugh.*" This was coming from someone who did not know I am gay. Additionally this same person used racist terms to refer to people from Pakistan, and in my opinion spoke poorly of women, stating that it was his experience that you should not be truthful to females.

I was recently on a walk with several other pilots, including women, and there were two dogs that were barking and playing with each other in a fashion that looked as if they were about to mate. The comments that followed shortly afterwards consisted of a few funny jokes, and then the fact that maybe they were both males. This was followed by a quick comment stating "*not that there is anything wrong with that*" followed by giggles. I can not tell you how many times I have heard "*not that there is anything wrong with that*" said after anything referencing 'gay' comes up. It is as if saying that phrase afterwards makes anything previously said okay, regardless of the context or comments previously made.

In a course I recently participated in, that was being taught by a senior manager, there was a statement to the group about communications one may have with one's wife, then as an afterthought the teacher said "*or partner, or non binary person, or....*" and there were a few chuckles in the crowd. It was a bit funny, but the reason I bring it up is because anytime someone wants to say '*significant other*' rather than '*wife*', it is phrased with a hint (or more then a hint) of humour as though to appear 'politically correct' and say what they feel they are supposed to say, while still letting everyone know that it is funny to them, or that they do not truly believe what they are saying.

These are a few examples which immediately come to mind. They happened at a company that has a robust, and detailed harassment policy, and has a high percentage of LGBTQ+ employees in other roles outside the cockpit.

There are several people I know who are 'out' in their home life, but are not vocal about who they are at work. They either feel it isn't worth the discussion, or will only admit to who they are if asked. There are others who are very happy to be out and talk about partners etc. I personally feel strongly that if I want to make my life at work easier, make my training sessions go well, and if I want to ever be anything more then a line pilot (such as a trainer, manager, check pilot etc.) it is basically easier not to have everyone know about my sexual orientation.

Lastly I want to mention that there is a huge difference when speaking about being out to people in different settings. It is much easier to be yourself in an office environment, or in a meeting with people (usually managers, HR or office personnel) who are interested in creating policies and a corporate culture accepting of all sorts of different people. They are trying to make their company desirable to the most qualified and competent staff regardless of orientation, sex, race, etc. In contrast, painting with a very broad brush, it is harder to be open and talk freely about who you are when you are in the cockpit, or on a layover with people who often don't support or understand, or appreciate, your lifestyle.

People tend to be protective of their own beliefs and as such, they surround themselves with others similar to them. So if, in general, the managers of flight ops are of an age, and from a background that is not as understanding of today's ways of thinking, it makes it harder to change the culture within that group of specialized workers. ■

> *Editor's note: When an employee feels that it is unsafe to reveal that they are part of the LGBTQ+ community to ensure that their career is not jeopardized, and when flight ops managers and senior pilots know what the company's policy on D&I is but still make inappropriate comments, inclusion is not happening and we suggest that it is necessary to look into why the program is not reaching these people and these areas of the company's operations.*