



Thinking about Allyship in Aviation

Introduction

Have you ever had to “come out” at work? If not, chances are you are either straight, or “in the closet”!

In Canada, only 43% of LGBTQ+ workers say they are out professionally¹. If we consider the statistical probability that up to 13% of the population is LGBTQ+², that means that up to one in eight of our colleagues are hiding a big part of themselves every day they come to work. It’s not hard to imagine the safety implications (both emotionally and practically) when so much of someone’s energy has to go towards making sure no one finds out their “secret”!

According to a 2012 Center for Talent Innovation (US) study, 24% of LGBTQ+ workers attribute their decision to come out professionally to a strong network of allies³. We can each make a conscious effort each day, to contribute to inclusive spaces.

As a straight ally, ask yourself if you are “out” in the workplace? For example, have you ever gendered your spouse when chatting with a colleague about weekend activities? An ally acknowledges when they have privilege in a space, is aware of who lacks it and stands in solidarity. There are many ways that you can advocate for and support inclusion; allies can help elevate LGBTQ+ issues in ways that LGBTQ+ people cannot do on their own. When employees feel a sense of belonging, feel included and feel safe to be themselves, then our industry as a whole becomes safer.

Two Stories

The following two stories are based on real-life events in two different Aviation industry partners in Canada. Identifying details have been removed to preserve anonymity. As you read them, consider the following: How does the ally play a role in what transpired? Who was affected? How might things have been done differently in a workplace with more allies willing to speak up?

Story A – Going to the Dogs	Story B – Partners & Spouses
<p>During a layover, the crew were walking to a local restaurant when they came across two dogs that were barking and playing with each other in a fashion that looked as if they were going to mate shortly.</p> <p>Various people made a few funny jokes, and then one of the pilots suggested that maybe they were both males. This was followed quickly by, "not that there is anything wrong with that", and several people giggled nervously.</p> <p>Unbeknownst to the rest of the crew, one of the FAs was gay. He kept walking, quietly, his face flushed, hoping that none of his colleagues would notice. No one said anything else about the matter, and the conversation soon turned to dinner options as the group arrived at the restaurant.</p>	<p>A group of air traffic controllers was attending a safety training session. The senior manager who was delivering the course made a statement to the group about some communication one may do with their wife, then as an afterthought, the teacher said "or partner, or non binary person, or...." and there were a few chuckles in the crowd.</p> <p>One of the student ATCs, a new hire who had recently gone through some diversity training, noticed that in general, it seemed like anytime someone said anything about about politically correct ways of referring to one's significant other besides "wife" or "husband", there is a hint (or more then a hint) of humour in order to say what they feel they are supposed to say, while still letting everyone know that it is funny to them, or that don't truly believe in what is being said.</p> <p>The new controller wondered whether and how to raise this issue, and with whom.</p>

Reflection Questions:

- In Story A, the pilot who made the homophobic comment qualified it by adding, “*not that there is anything wrong with that*”. Does that make their previous comment okay? Why or why not?
- How do you think the FA felt in this situation?
- No one in the group spoke up during the walk. If you were an ally, what are some ways you could initiate a follow up conversation (for example, at dinner later on), or address the inappropriate comment in the moment?
- In Story B, the controller was frustrated, but wasn’t sure how to address the issue. What advice would you give them?
- What is wrong with the statement that was made in each story?
- How might the comment from the senior manager (and the subsequent laughter) make LGBTQ+ folks in the room feel? What message is being sent?
- Have you ever had to “come out” at work? What was that experience like? Did you feel like there were allies in the space to support you? How did that impact your decision regarding what to say about your identity, and to whom?

Discussion & Next Steps:

As an ally, you have an important role to play. Speaking up can be uncomfortable, but it’s important! What could you say (and to whom), or what could you do, if you overheard a scenario like the ones in the stories shared above?

Even before scenarios like this unfold, they can be prevented. If you are in a hiring or training role in your workplace, what kinds of structures and strategies can you put in place to screen potential employees and ascertain their understanding of bias and discrimination in the workplace? How can training be used more effectively in your organization to eliminate homo- and trans-phobia and other bias? (What are some things your company already does? What could you do differently?)

Statements like, “I don’t see colour” and “I don’t care who you sleep with” are not reflections of allyship in action. Being an ally is about showing up for others, hearing their story and honoring the differences that exist between us. It is about understanding our own biases and held stereotypes so that we can see beyond them, and see the individual. It is about widening spaces to allow people to feel safe to be themselves and not feel the need to hide an aspect of their identity. Check out our “Tip Sheet” for Allies for some practical ideas in the aviation workspace.



¹ Telus study, Workplace Safety for LGBTQ employees, 2016

² Fondation Jasmin Roy survey, LGBT Realities, 2017

³ Center for Talent Innovation, The Power of Out 2.0 - LGBT in the Workplace, 2013