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## **ARTICLE** **MANAGING PEOPLE**

# How to Make Your Workplace Safe for Transgender Employees

*by Jeffrey W. Hull*

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“I applaud [Caitlin Jenner’s] moxie in stepping out in such a public way. But real courage for a trans person comes in just going to work—at a job—every day. Something Caitlin will likely not have to do,” said Jeremy Wallace, a transgender participant in my leadership training program and author of the memoir *Taking the Scenic Route to Manhood*. He’s right. The statistics are bleak. Transgender individuals are 40% more likely to attempt suicide and 50% more likely to be unemployed or homeless than the general population. The hard truth is that despite the splashy emergence of

Caitlin, formerly Bruce, Jenner, as transgender, most trans people in our society remain largely invisible, rarely seen in large organizational settings, let alone in leadership roles. The “outing” of a major celebrity or sports figure (remember Renée Richards from the 70s?) has, up to now, barely made a dent in the harsh reality most trans people live every day.

Is it possible that things will be different this time? In the wake of Laverne Cox, trans star from the highly-regarded Netflix series, *Orange is the New Black*, gracing the cover of *Time* magazine, and the television show *Transparent* winning a Golden Globe for a searing portrayal of a transgender life, perhaps Caitlin’s big debut will accelerate a major shift in social awareness. Recent polls in the U.S. show that over 70% of Americans believe transgender people should be protected from discrimination in the workplace. Perhaps all of this publicity creates an opening—a moment of opportunity—for the “real” work to get done: making the world a safe place for trans people to live, work, and succeed.

As an executive coach and organizational psychologist who runs leadership training programs for large corporate firms and non-profits, I have rarely seen trans participants in my programs until recently. When I asked Jeremy why that might be true, he had a ready answer: “Trans people are still very unlikely to stand up or stand out in an organization. In fact, they more often try to do the opposite, to remain hidden, below the radar, and in many cases they exit the job world once they’ve chosen to undertake the process of a full transition. Most workplaces are hardly welcoming—and certainly not likely to send a trans individual to leadership training—at least not yet.”

That may be true, I thought, as I pondered Jeremy’s response. Yet here he was—a trans man being groomed to stand on the podium for a nationally recognized social advocacy organization. And he was no longer alone. I’ve recently met three other transgender individuals in my leadership programs, all of them very impressive. The times, as Dylan sings, “they are a changing.” But are we ready? Are we willing to turn, with an open mind—and heart—and not only accept, but work alongside or follow, emerging leaders like Jeremy?

Jeremy is in his mid-forties, a successful executive who manages a number of small business franchises in and around Las Vegas. In fact, his success as a business leader led him to want to give back to the community, so he recently volunteered to be a regional leader for the Human Rights Campaign, which sent him on to Washington DC, and to me, for leadership training. During the four-day leadership institute, we had the opportunity to talk at length about his story.

He told me that as a young girl growing up he always “thought he was a boy.” He did all the things boys did—climbing trees, playing with trucks and cars instead of dolls, and playing ice hockey. As a child and adolescent growing up in the American heartland, it never occurred to “Jennifer” that she could actually become a boy. She just lived—becoming increasingly isolated and depressed—with a seemingly intractable contradiction: “I was a misfit, a boy trapped in an alien body from which I could never escape.” It wasn’t until many years later that Jeremy learned it was even possible to “become the man I always knew that I was.” The decision to transition and the subsequent surgery

happened “very fast” over a period of 8 months. As he put it, “Once I knew that it was possible... I wanted to do it!”

That doesn’t mean it was easy. He recalled painful memories of working up the courage to tell his family, then slowly informing his franchisees, who were in some ways more than just employees—they were “like family.” He was amazed to find that, with a few exceptions, most were surprised but ultimately accepting. The first lesson I gleaned from Jeremy was that getting others to understand and accept his transition was made easier by telling people that he was just as much a student of the process as they were. He didn’t expect them to know how to handle it at first, just as he didn’t quite know how to handle it himself. He was changing in appearance (over a period of many months) and finally claiming the male identity he had always felt was real. But deep down he wasn’t changing who he really was. If anything, it was the opposite: he was finally becoming who he had been all along.

Jeremy admits that he has been fortunate. He has an accepting family and was already running a successful business when he made the decision to transition. Unlike many of the transgender people he meets in support groups around the country, he didn’t have to worry about being fired. But he still grappled—and grapples to this day—with fears of being rejected or seen as crazy or unworthy. “In my experience,” he told me, “the real issue for trans people is not so much acceptance by the world, but self-acceptance. For so many years, I lived with a deep-seated feeling that there was ‘something wrong’ with me and even now, looking in the mirror and finally seeing the man that I always knew I should be, I have to work every day to feel safe in my own skin.”

In this sense, Jeremy is not so different from the rest of us. We all have to learn to accept our flaws, our gifts, all of who we are. His journey offers a number of lessons about self-acceptance along with acceptance in the workplace. So I asked him for advice on how to help managers turn what may initially feel foreign or awkward—learning that a trans individual is on their team—into a growth opportunity for everyone. The key, Jeremy pointed out, is fairly simple, but not easy: “Make everyone feel safe.”

Here are some other pieces of advice that Jeremy shared with me for creating an atmosphere of safety and inclusion:

1. **Educate yourself about the issues and the language of gender identity** (e.g. gender identity is not the same thing as sexual orientation)
2. **Have a true open door policy** so that an employee can approach you about their transition when they’re ready. A few best practices for achieving this?
  - a. Put your open door policy in writing
  - b. Actually keep your door open (!)
  - c. On a regular basis, schedule and communicate open-door hours when any staff member can stop by and see you
3. **Treat every trans person as an individual.** Discuss with them how they would like to announce their transition, and how and when they will be presenting their true gender identity full-time

4. **Don't be afraid to ask questions**, make honest mistakes, and admit that you are learning
5. **Maintain a sense of humor.** Jeremy shared that when he felt awkward trying to explain his situation to confused employees, he would often use humor to get the ball rolling: “Hey, I’m new to this process myself,” he’d say. “Do you think going from shaving my armpits and legs to shaving my face is easy? If I can get through the nicks and bruises of that, we can all stumble our way through this together!”
6. **Address the bathroom policy before the person “comes out”** to co-workers (e.g. make it acceptable for trans people to use the bathroom that conforms to their identity, not just biology, or consider designating all bathrooms as [all-gender](#). You can find more information on [bathroom best practices](#) from the U.S. Department of Labor.)
7. **Seek out an expert for diversity training.** The burden of education should not be on the trans employee (it can be frustrating to be perceived as a “token” or someone else’s teachable moment)
8. **Take an interest in the transitioning employee but remember that there should be clear boundaries between home and work.** As in any professional environment, the primary focus should be on the job and work performance, not the trans employee’s personal situation. The key for managers is to listen and be supportive but refrain from becoming embroiled in the transition process itself.

While this is the advice of one individual and is not meant to be representative of the experience of all transgender leaders, I think it is a good starting place for managers wondering how to create a safe workspace for trans employees. What was most noticeable to me as I reflected on the tips Jeremy shared is how, with the exception of #6 (bathroom norms being one area of unique complexity), all of the other suggestions are best practices for creating a welcoming, safe and empowering environment *for all employees*, not just those who identify as transgender.

The science of emotional intelligence demonstrates that the human tendency toward fear and judgment of others who are different can be overcome with empathy, deep listening, and a willingness to tap into our common humanity. But in order to get there, managers need to create a space for dialogue about the challenges of “otherness” faced by trans people and by many other employees as well.

The time is ripe for transformation. Not just because of celebrities like Jenner (who deserve praise for raising the public profile of trans individuals), but because leaders like Jeremy are emerging in organizations every day and deserve the opportunity to make their full contributions—for the good of themselves, their teams, and their employers. With humility, humor, and eloquence, LGBTQ leaders are becoming more visible at the water cooler. But beyond increasing visibility, I hope this heralds a new kind of workplace, one where “difference” is not just tolerated but embraced. Now that “the Caitlin is out of the bag” so to speak, perhaps the workplace will finally follow public opinion, becoming a space where human beings in all their endless variety, creativity and talent feel safe, welcomed, heard, and empowered to lead.

I am thankful for the wisdom Jeremy imparted to me about his experience as a transgender leader. But remember one of his most important tips: the burden of education should not fall on the trans individual. Bringing in a diversity expert can help your team operate more inclusively and ultimately become more productive. As we know, organizations tend to perform better when employees can bring their whole selves to work.

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**Jeffrey W. Hull**, Ph.D. is the director of education and business development at the Institute of Coaching (a Harvard Medical School affiliate), a clinical instructor in psychology at Harvard Medical School, and an adjunct professor of leadership at NYU. Over 20 years, he has served as a coach and consultant to hundreds of organizations around the world, specializing in leadership development and organizational strategy, design, and transformation.

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