

Things NOT to Say to LGBT People

Same-sex marriage may have been legalized nationwide in 2015, but inequalities remain on the books when it comes to workplace discrimination. (For more information on workplace inequalities, be sure to check out our Facts & Figures section of this Meeting in a Box.) However, even in states that may have gotten the memo, off-the-record comments — whether ill-intentioned or not — persist. According to a study from the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), 62 percent of LGBT workers say they’ve heard other workers making jokes about gay or lesbian people at work. Forty-three percent said they’ve heard jokes about bisexual people, and 40 percent said the same regarding transgender people.

Unfortunately, some people are not inclined to speak up. About half of LGBT people said they “ignore it or let it go” when they hear people making LGBT jokes at work. Only 34 percent of LGBT people said they do not hear these types of jokes at work.

Fostering an inclusive environment is good for your company’s bottom-line. About a quarter of LGBT employees reported staying at a job because it came with an inclusive environment.

Not sure what’s okay to say? Here’s a list of what *not* to say to get you started.

1 “We all already knew you were LGBT.”

This comment not only signals to your colleague that you have stereotyped them; it also demonstrates that you have been talking about them with other coworkers. This would likely make any employee — LGBT or not — feel uncomfortable.

2 “How does your family feel about that?”

This could be coming from a place of concern — many LGBT people are not out to their families. But even if you’re asking to sympathize, it could be a delicate topic. In this case, it’s best to respect your colleague’s privacy.

3 “Does this mean your kids will be gay, too?”

If you don’t like vegetables, will your kids be born hating carrots, too? This is a closed-minded question with no

scientific evidence to back it up. (At the very least, it assumes your co-worker *wants* to have children — which may not be the case, LGBT or not!)

4 “It’s too bad that you’re gay.”

... Why? This way of teasing could be meant as a joke or even flirting. But it suggests that being gay is a con. Keep this one to yourself.

5 “I love gay people. I like them better than straight people.”

This overstating is not just awkward but unnecessary. You don’t have to take it that far. Just treat your LGBT colleague the same way you treat your other co-workers, and you won’t have to justify where you stand.

6 “I have an LGBT friend you would LOVE.”

Having one thing in common with someone does not guarantee they’ll

be friends. You wouldn’t assume your two brown-haired buddies will hit it off. Same rule applies here.

7 (to a transgender person) “Is it such a big deal to use the gender-neutral restroom?”

The bathroom issue remains a topic of debate. But did you know that, according to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), denying a transgender person the right to use the bathroom that aligns with their gender identity is a violation of the Civil Rights Act?

8 (to a transgender person) “What surger(ies) have you had?”

This displays ignorance on two fronts. For one, would never ask someone else about their surgical/medical histories. Many people have questions regarding transgender issues, but if your curiosity gets the best of you, do your own outside research. Second, the answer very well could be none! It’s wrong to assume that every transgender person has some type of sex reassignment surgery. This is a personal choice; to ask is a big invasion of privacy.

MORE THINGS NOT TO SAY

“What should I [wear, do with my hair]?”

“Do you know if [insert name] is gay too?”

“Wait, you’re not attracted to me ... right?”