
Coming Out at Work



By [Elizabeth Florent Treacy](#) , INSEAD

Practitioner research sheds light on how LGBTQ equality in the workplace benefits everyone, and how best to promote it.

Pride Month may have passed with the end of June, but the need for companies to increase awareness of LGBTQ issues among staff is growing as more executives – such as former British Petroleum chief Lord John Browne and Apple CEO Tim Cook – choose to come out as LGBTQ.

Underpinning this urgency is diversity, which a growing body of research links to creativity, emotional intelligence and courage. Companies that wish to tap the benefits of diversity cannot overlook the needs of LGBTQ executives. To retain and recruit them, organisations would do well to practise fair process by speaking frankly and listening to divergent views; focusing on visible role models; and co-opting queer executives into the boardroom.

To be sure, navigating LGBTQ issues in the workplace can be fraught. Using a psychodynamic lens, two graduates of INSEAD's [Executive Master in Change](#) programme explored the topic in the [Journeys through the Organisational Labyrinth](#), the first volume of the *Annals of Psychodynamic-Systemic Practitioner Research* published by the school with

funding from the Dutch Alumni Fellowship in Leadership, Diversity and Governance. The thesis projects conducted by the two alumni shed light on the triumphs of today's LGBTQ leaders.

LGBTQ in the boardroom

Stevin Veenendaal, who runs a training company specialising in leadership, diversity and team development, studied how openly gay top executives lead, and how their teams respond to them. The common traits of the executives appeared to be heightened creativity, emotional intelligence and authenticity, as Veenendaal gleaned from interviews with seven corporate high-fliers, including **Lord Browne**, for his paper *Out of the Closet, Into the Boardroom*.

Veenendaal's research indicates that openly gay executives are more determined to succeed and prove themselves simply because they are aware that they are different. They are more creative and think out of the box. Their emotional intelligence is sharpened from having to constantly assess possible threats and dangers, and they actively promote diversity and inclusion in their companies. Yet their awareness of what is considered "masculine" or "feminine" behaviour influences and at times changes their leadership style. Ultimately, all those interviewed agree that staying true to themselves is key when it comes to leadership – personal façades are always bad for business. Veenendaal was struck by his top-flight interviewees' willingness to engage with his study, as well as their openness and pride in their journeys.

Coming out to co-workers

While Veenendaal looked at executives who were openly gay, **Angela Matthes**, CEO of Baloise Life (Liechtenstein), drew on her own experience to examine the journey of executives who are coming out to their colleagues.

When Matthes decided to come out as a transgender woman in the summer of 2014, she leveraged **fair process** to plan her transition. Early on, Matthes – who at that time had worked for insurance group Baloise for 30 years – informed her board and executive peers of her impending transition. The Head of HR immediately offered to announce the organisation's support for Matthes, but she insisted on taking time to engage, communicate and manage expectations with her colleagues under the fair process framework, which seeks to help people accept outcomes which they might not like or be

fully comfortable with.

Over two and a half months, Matthes conducted more than 150 conversations – 68 of them one-to-one – with colleagues and stakeholders. In her thesis, *Fair Process and Gender Transition in the Workplace*, she details her experience and findings based on three fair process principles:

- **Engagement:** The first condition for engaging others is that the person transitioning has self-confidence and is fully engaged in this step. Once you are out, you are out. When you share facts with superiors, peers and subordinates and even ask them to participate in the planning, they feel respected and appreciated rather than confused and helpless. They then become part of the journey and part of the solution.
- **Explanation:** Sharing one's story helps your colleagues understand that you have not made an impulsive decision. It takes them from thinking, "Our male colleague is suddenly coming to work dressed as a woman" to "Here is a human being who has tried her entire life to find harmony between her physical gender identity and her perceived gender identity." The better they understand, the more likely they are to support your decision.
- **Expectation and process control:** Control of the process and decision is another key element of a successful transition. Fair process includes engaging the environment and inviting people's ideas as you plan the transition, but the final decision is yours.

Taking stock, fifty years on

The reality remains that many LGBTQ leaders still feel compelled to stay in the closet despite leaps in gay rights since the 1969 [Stonewall riots](#) in New York that birthed the international gay rights movement. LGBTQ people remain widely stigmatised, rendering them vulnerable to discrimination, even violence, and deprived of their basic rights. According to the [World Health Organisation](#), more than 65 countries criminalise same-sex sexual relations, including at least eight that impose the death penalty.

In 1978, Harvey Milk, an openly gay member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, was assassinated at work. [Holly Near](#), an American activist and musician, responded in her own way. At the end of her concerts, she would ask that everyone stand and join her in singing "We are a gay and lesbian people" as the final verse of [Singing for Our Lives](#), her tribute to Milk. Some people felt uncomfortable to sing along, but many others in the

audience reported that it was the first time they felt safe pronouncing those words in public.

Fifty years after Stonewall, the final chorus of *Singing for Our Lives* has become “We are gay and straight together”. Let us not pack up our dedication to exploring diversity as if the topic were a seasonal garment that we put back into the closet until the next Pride Month.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/coming-out-work>

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About the series

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

As society increasingly demands more inclusive leadership and culture, INSEAD is actively studying and engaging business leaders and practitioners on anti-racism, gender balance and other key topics related to creating fairer, more representative organisations. In this series, INSEAD faculty and their close collaborators with rich experience in practice give their insights and suggestions on how to develop diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in businesses and organisations.