
How LGBTQ+ Employees Can Embrace Authenticity



By Antoine Tirard (INSEAD MBA '97D), Founder, NexTalent, and Claire Harbour (INSEAD MBA '92J), Founder, Culture Pearl

Four professionals with different sexual orientations and gender identities describe their journeys.

Diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI) matters are high on the agendas of many organisations these days. With good reason, too. Bringing your authentic self to work increases productivity, engagement and job satisfaction. The four subjects we introduce in this article all needed substantial introspection, planning and courage before they could fully come out at work. We hope that their stories can inspire more authenticity and openness in the workplace.

Michel - The gay French organisational psychologist who went to the US

When Michel's photo appeared in the New York Times, alongside his partner Rob, he knew there was no turning back. His colleagues at the company where he had just started working would no longer need to guess at his sexuality or his marital status. The photo was the hard-earned result of

years of campaigning for equal rights in immigration. Over the preceding years, he had revealed his orientation with varying openness, according to the context he found himself in.

Growing up in rural France, Michel recognised that he was gay early, but only opened up about it when he went to university in Paris. His parents, who “had always known”, did not learn officially of their son’s orientation until he had met Rob, his then-future-husband, at the age of 20. Both aspired to create a family and have children, which, in the early 1990s, was relatively unheard of. Their relationship took off fast, which motivated Michel to join Rob in the United States, all the while continuing his studies in psychology.

When preparing to move to New York City, Michel took the conscious decision to be “completely out” on arrival, using the geographic shift as a catalyst. He took on human resources and consulting jobs, while completing a PhD in Organisational Psychology at Columbia. During his internship, he received the support of a leader who encouraged him to get involved in the New York Pride month, both personally and on behalf of the organisation.

Michel frequently wondered what made him stand out more: his French accent or his sexual orientation? However, he displayed both with confidence. He would no more have switched his name to Michael than he would have feigned heterosexuality to avoid inconvenience. Authenticity has always been his choice. Michel’s identity journey has allowed him to be more intentional in all aspects of his life.

In fact, Michel has found that being foreign has been just as helpful to his career advancement as his being gay. In the right context, such as multicultural teams or DEI projects, he can lean in. However, on occasion, he has been made painfully aware of his difference. However, this has not held him back nearly as much as it has for his female or Black colleagues, as he is quick to point out.

Now a divorced parent of three children, Michel has been on a double journey, first of being relatively unusual in the gay community, and then finding himself more aligned on many fronts with the straight suburban parents he met at the school gate.

Michel’s advice to anyone contemplating coming out at work is simple: “Ask yourself why you are not out today. What is keeping you in the closet? Then consider your purpose in life and how much more being out would amplify

that purpose.” If you choose to come out, then “plan it, and lean on your friends and network, just like you would do with any significant change in your life, in or outside of work”.

Steve and Joe - The long-standing dual-career married couple riding choppy waters together

Steve and his husband Joe are both from traditionally “upstanding” Catholic American families. Despite being aware of their orientations since middle school, they each dated women through high school and college. This was the early 1980s, when the AIDS crisis was beginning to take its terrible toll.

Steve met Joe while in graduate school at Boston University. While not even “out” yet at work, he experienced a first brush with homophobia when an angry managing partner at the law firm where he worked berated him for attempting to raise funds for an AIDS awareness march. Unsurprisingly, Steve was “let go” a few months later. Joe, who had just recently entered Steve's life, soon became a source of support, and Steve moved his career into business and marketing.

Joe started out as both a teacher and a graduate trainee at Macy's. While it was tempting to be out in the retail industry, it was “absolutely inconceivable” in education, so he remained discreet for years, only revealing his identity to close friends and selected peers. He spent the next few years in corporate training, at Bank of America, where he was out to colleagues but not management, and then at Deloitte. This was when he took the plunge and asked for his relocation package to include “his partner”. He was delighted to find a warm response to the news.

With society opening up in the early 2000s, Joe and Steve got married on New Year's Eve 2006 in Massachusetts. The following year, Joe left Deloitte and moved to medical devices manufacturer Covidien (now Medtronic). He hinted at Steve's existence in the interview, and then sealed it by introducing him to a top leader of the company who “could not have cared less – in a good way!”

The pair do have endless anecdotes of microaggressions, but they seem to prefer to laugh about these stories rather than lament them. After Joe joined a new company, a colleague introduced herself, adding: “...and my husband's name is Steve.” Joe's knee-jerk retort? “So is mine!” The woman's shock was followed by embarrassment, then confusion, laughter, and finally

an apology.

Steve and Joe both groan over people's tendency to assume that gay men are promiscuous. Steve has been grabbed inappropriately by men years ago at drunken company parties. However, both underline that for the most part, the more they were out, the better things were. Joe concluded, "If you have found your true self and are comfortable with that, and you can express creativity or references to 'family' then you can bring your whole self to the workplace."

Laura - A gender transition which felt like jumping out of a plane without a parachute

Signs that Laura's assigned gender wasn't right for her emerged early on. Although the little boy at the time relished playing "dress-up", she felt pressure from adults who firmly told her that she should dress as a devil at Halloween and not a witch. Bullied at school, she knew something was amiss, but could not figure out what.

Laura started her career between New York and Paris, and began to feel less different than she felt at home. While her work in banking and consulting fulfilled a cerebral "itch", she loathed the macho competitiveness, and received occasional comments about the "feminine tone of her memos". However, in France, she found the noise of gender got lost in the noise of culture. "I could dress elegantly without drawing attention, and I didn't have to worry about body carriage issues like crossing my legs at the knee. I stopped paying attention to gender-based perceptions of how I should behave."

After an MBA at INSEAD, while consulting in Russia, things became "a bit awkward, because in that culture, men were expected to be dominant, and to just 'grab' whatever they wanted." Despite the difficulty of socialising in such an environment, she did meet her future wife. They moved in together, and eventually returned to the US and married.

Once back in the US, however, the distracting urge to cross-dress re-emerged. Adapting to a new job in the American city of Boston produced reverse culture shock. She felt "burdened by the expectation that I should behave like the American man I thought I had escaped". The inability to express herself authentically took its toll. Eventually, her wife found her secret Ann Taylor suit collection, left a furious note and walked out. A vicious

year-long divorce ensued.

Laura made her first “confession” about gender during a counselling session. Curled up in a huge armchair and wearing an expensive Zegna suit, she blurted out, “I think I have a gender issue” – and then broke down. Later, she came out to the woman she’d been dating; her confession was accepted reluctantly but sympathetically, with the elegant touch of a gift of makeup.

Laura discovered support resources, including a service in New York where she could have a male-to-female makeover. When she saw her new reflection in the mirror, it felt like she was seeing her true self for the first time. Connecting with an active chapter of cross-dressers in Boston gave her an outlet to explore her identity. Growing up, there had been no transgender role models “other than psychos in the movies”, but now she heard about women who had transitioned successfully.

Gaining admission to a top law school known for its pioneering racial inclusivity offered a safe environment to take a major step. She consulted with school officials to see “whether I can begin law school presenting as female”. When day one arrived, she put on her favourite Ann Taylor suit, strolled across the Boston Common and joined the Dean’s Reception. She hasn’t looked back since.

While law school provided a relatively safe space in which to transition, other social situations were more awkward. Coming out via email to her business school alumni community, where Laura had been president, was relatively easy. Re-appearing at events was more difficult. As she points out, she could not just appear at a conference after multiple appearance-changing surgeries and say, “Hello, remember me?”

Physically and emotionally exhausted after her last surgery, Laura took some time out. She doubted her ability to find a white-collar job ever again. She began a new path, teaching English and tutoring students for GMAT tests. Having built the relevant expertise, she launched a consultancy for international business school applicants, eventually emerging as a leader in her industry. “What I do today would have been impossible in my old gender”, she says. “Authenticity is at the heart of what I do. Being confidently and authentically ‘who I am’ encourages my clients to discover and embrace their own stories in the same resonant way.”

Laura's advice? "Get to know yourself, ignore the background noise and trust your instincts. That's the only way to find a path that's right for you." She concedes that her transition felt like "jumping out of a plane without a parachute" and acknowledges that "nobody chooses this: it's a bit like chemotherapy. You know you need it to save your life, but you pray you can survive it."

Six recommendations for coming out at work

1. Take the time to understand yourself, your needs and your context.
2. Conduct a risk-benefit analysis of coming out at work.
3. If you feel uncomfortable coming out in your current workplace, it's probably the wrong place for you.
4. If it's easier for you, take advantage of contextual changes, such as a new city, industry, company or team.
5. Don't rush if you don't want to and be comfortable with not everybody knowing at the same time, unless you prefer to do it "in one shot".
6. Be ready to help people manage their surprise.

Six ways a minority sexual identity may benefit your leadership and career

(Based on [Stevin Veenendaal](#)'s paper, "Out of the Closet, Into the Boardroom")

1. Your outsider status and bicultural perspective result in more creative and outside-of-the-box approaches.
2. Constantly assessing possible threats and dangers gives you a heightened emotional intelligence in business.
3. Having experienced being in a minority first-hand, you can actively promote diversity and inclusion in your company.
4. A non-normative sexual orientation is giving you a greater determination and drive to prove yourself.
5. Your awareness of what is considered 'masculine' or 'feminine' behaviour influences, and at times changes, your leadership style.
6. Life experience is teaching you that authentic leadership is key – personal façades are always bad for business.

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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.